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Computer active

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From the Editor

One of the ironies of software design is how difficult it is to make things simple. The instinct most developers have is to keep adding buttons, settings and menus, mistakenly thinking users will equate more features with a better product.

But the best developers see their job as removing such clutter. Crucially, they're not afraid of users instantly rejecting a stripped-back interface because it looks *too* basic. They also know which tools are essential in a program, and prioritise those within the design.

Robert Irvine has spent most of his adult life seeking simple software, and reveals his current favourites in our Cover Feature. These most definitely *aren't* basic tools. They all contain advanced features that will satisfy confident users. And they all seem to know what you want to do before you've even thought of it.

As a simple man of simple pleasures, they suit me perfectly. To be happy I merely need a mug of coffee, Beethoven on repeat and a photo-editing program without a trillion filters.

Daniel Booth
editor@computeractive.co.uk

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6 minutes
New length of adverts every hour in Amazon Prime Video – *p9*

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Size of a reader's AppData folder that he wants to move from his C Drive – *p66*

HOW TO USE SNIPCA URLs

We use snipcas to turn long URLs that are hard to type into ones that are short and simple. They aren't websites themselves, which means they won't be recognised if you type them into Google. Instead, you need to type them into your browser address bar, then press Enter. Doing this will take you to the correct website.

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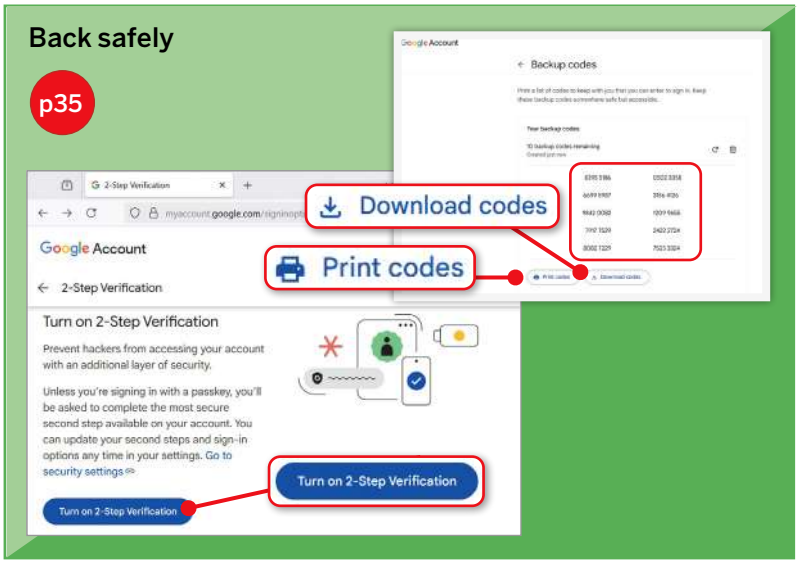
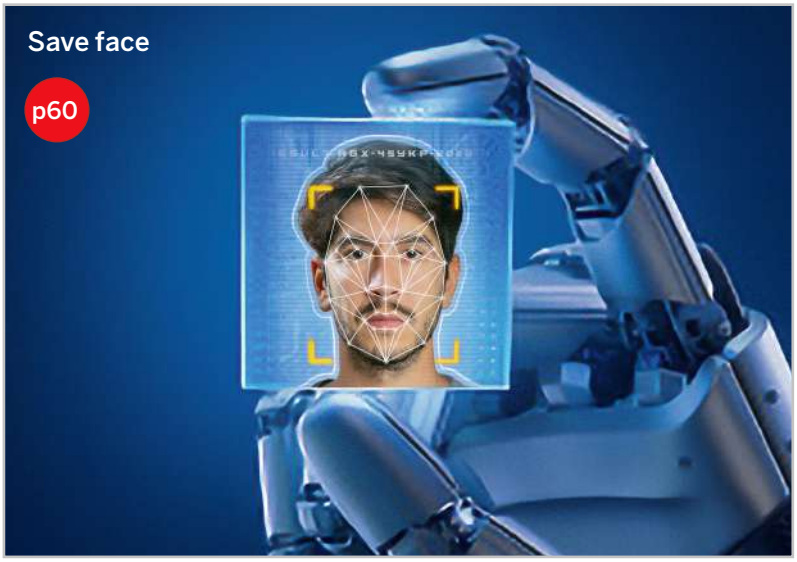

Back safely
p35
Backup codes
Download codes
Print codes
Google Account
2-Step Verification
Turn on 2-Step Verification
Prevent hackers from accessing your account with an additional layer of security.
Unless you're signing in with a passkey, you'll be asked to complete the most secure second step available on your account. You can update your second steps and sign-in options any time in your settings. Go to security settings
Turn on 2-Step Verification



New tool makes it easier to move from Windows 10 to 11

Microsoft is working on a tool that makes it easier to move your files and data from a Windows 10 computer to a new one running Windows 11, ahead of support for 10 ending in October.

The feature, called MigrationApp, is part of the Backup tool, which Microsoft launched in 2023 for backing up files to OneDrive.

WHAT WE THINK

With Windows 10's market share actually increasing, Microsoft will be desperate for this tool to be a hit. But it'll be too basic for many users, who won't want to leave their settings, software and profiles behind when they upgrade. However, we'll explain how to use it when it launches, along with all your other options over the next few months, including how to keep running Windows 10 reasonably safely – albeit with limitations.

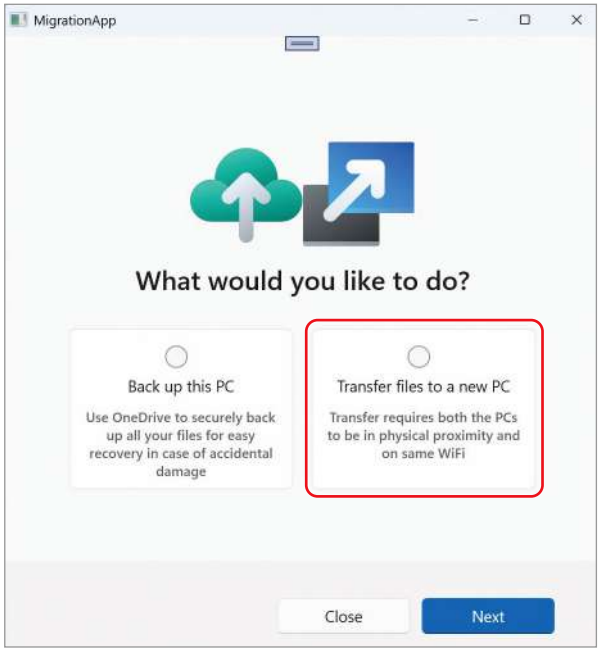
It can be used to move data between any Windows computer, and was first added to preview builds of Windows 11 earlier this year.

By adding it to Windows 10, Microsoft no doubt hopes people will use it to move their files to a Windows 11 computer ahead of the 14 October deadline.

The tool was recently spotted in a test build of Windows 10 by a Windows Insider who frequently reveals new tools on X using the name 'Phantom of Earth' (www.snipca.com/55255).

It appears as the option 'Transfer files to a new PC' (see screenshot), which says moving files requires "both the PCs to be in physical proximity and on same WiFi".

Microsoft hasn't activated the tool yet, so it can't currently be used to move files. It's likely to turn it on as the deadline approaches as part of a big push to persuade users to upgrade.


MigrationApp
What would you like to do?
Back up this PC
Use OneDrive to securely back up all your files for easy recovery in case of accidental damage
Transfer files to a new PC
Transfer requires both the PCs to be in physical proximity and on same WiFi
Close
Next

However, it'll probably be a basic tool focused on moving core files, key folders and some settings between PCs.

It's unlikely to contain the advanced features of third-party tools like Laplink's PCmover and Todo PCTrans from EaseUS.

These provide much deeper migrations, letting you move software, user profiles and system settings, but you need to pay for them.

PCmover costs £34.95 on our Software Store (discounted from £49.95, www.snipca.com/55257), while Todo PCTrans costs £51.98 for a "lifetime licence": www.snipca.com/55258.

Sign into Facebook on phones without passwords

You'll soon be able to log into your Facebook account on your phone using a passkey such as a PIN, fingerprint or facial scan – meaning you won't need to type your password.

Meta, the company that owns Facebook, says using passkeys to verify your identity and log in is "easier and more secure than traditional passwords".

On its blog (www.snipca.com/55269) Meta showed a phone receiving a message asking whether you want to log in with a "saved passkey" (1 in our screenshot), and a Continue button below to tap 2.

You can set up passkeys in Facebook's Accounts Centre: https://accountscenter.facebook.com. Meta said the ones you use will also be available on Facebook Messenger "in the coming months".

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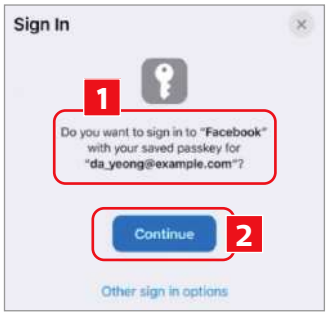


You'll like this... You can now customise subtitles in Google Meet video chats (www.snipca.com/55268)

but not this... A OneDrive user lost 30 years' of files when Microsoft locked his account (www.snipca.com/55265)

WhatsApp starts showing ads – breaking years-old promise

WhatsApp has started showing adverts, breaking a promise made to the tool's creators over 10 years ago.

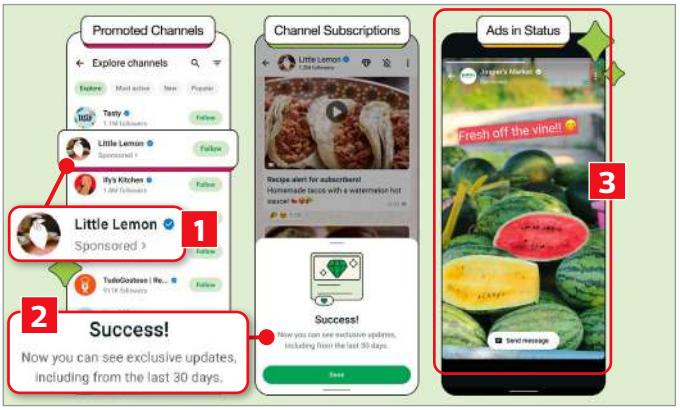
The ads appear in the Updates tab, which contains your Status and any Channels you've subscribed to. Adverts won't appear in your chats, and if you never open the Updates tab you won't see any ads.

But the move will still annoy users who like the fact that WhatsApp is currently one of the few popular tools free of adverts.

It will also anger WhatsApp's co-founders Jan Koum and Brian Acton, who sold the app to Meta in 2014 for $19bn (about £12.5bn at the time).

Their motto for WhatsApp was "No ads, no games, no gimmicks". They claim Meta boss Mark Zuckerberg told them the tool would remain free of adverts.

But Meta has come under increasing pressure from shareholders to find a way of making money from WhatsApp.



WhatsApp made £500m in the first quarter of 2025, mostly from companies paying to use the Business version of the app. This was a fraction of the $41bn Meta made from Facebook and Instagram, mainly through adverts.

WhatsApp says the adverts will be based on your language, location and which channels you follow, not your phone number, groups you belong to or what you type in a chat.

However, those who have linked their WhatsApp account to Facebook or Instagram will see more personalised ads.

WhatsApp gave examples of the adverts in its blog (www.snipca.com/55234). Its screenshot (pictured above) shows a company promoting its channel 1, the message you see when you pay for a channel subscription in order to see exclusive content 2, and an advert in the Status section 3.

ChatGPT loses at chess to 1977 Atari console

ChatGPT has been humiliated in a game of chess – by a 48-year-old Atari console. Developer Robert Jr Caruso from US software firm Citrix set up a match between the AI chatbot and Atari Video Chess (pictured) – a game released for the Atari 2600 in the late 1970s.

He described the contest in a LinkedIn post (www.snipca.com/55248), saying it came after a conversation with ChatGPT about the history of AI in chess that led to the chatbot volunteering to play Atari Chess.

ChatGPT wanted to find out how quickly it could beat a game that only thinks one or two moves ahead and is powered by a 1.19MHz processor. By contrast, today's computers have processors that run at 3,000MHz (3GHz) or more, roughly 2,500 times faster.

Caruso gave ChatGPT "a baseline board layout to identify pieces" and played the match using an emulator, but said the chatbot got "absolutely wrecked on the beginner level".

He said throughout the 90-minute game it "confused rooks for bishops, missed pawn forks, and repeatedly lost track of where pieces were".

However, AI experts responded to Caruso's post to point out that ChatGPT is designed to predict and generate text, not to play or understand games with strict rules. Atari on the other hand has the rules of chess programmed into its software.

Have you beaten ChatGPT at chess? Let us know: letters@computeractive.co.uk

IN BRIEF

OLD TP-LINK ROUTERS ARE BEING HACKED

Security experts have warned about a "high priority" risk to the TP-Link routers TL-WR940N (versions 2 to 4), TL-WR841N (8 to 10) and TL-WR740N (1 to 2). The US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency said hackers are exploiting flaws in the routers to take control of home networks. TP-Link no longer releases security updates for the routers, which are all between 12 and 15 years old. If you use one, replace it immediately.

SAMSUNG TO AXE ACCOUNTS ON 31 JULY

Samsung will soon start deleting accounts that haven't been signed into for two years, wiping all their data. The accounts let people use Samsung content on smartphones, tablets, TVs and more, and gives access to Samsung Cloud and Pay. To keep your account, log in by 31 July – see the email Samsung is sending to customers: www.snipca.com/55254.

TOMORROW'S WORLD

Next time you're worried about being enslaved by robots, watch these mechanical dogs 'dance' on *America's Got Talent* (www.snipca.com/55237). At 37 seconds one simply slumps to the floor exhausted. Boston Dynamics, which makes the dogs, shrugged and said its motto was "build it, break it, fix it".

IN BRIEF

SEARCH GIFs FROM THE EARLY INTERNET

The Internet Archive has improved the results of its GifCities search engine (https://gifcities.org, pictured below), making it easier and faster to find GeoCities GIFs from the 1990s and early 2000s. You can now search for GIFs using keywords and file dimensions, such as 32x32 pixels. Previously, you could search only by file name. Read more on the Internet Archive's blog: www.snipca.com/55203.

UPDATE PIXEL 6a PHONE TO STOP OVERHEATING

Google is releasing an update for a "subset" of its Pixel 6a phones to stop them overheating. The compulsory update will arrive in July and limits battery capacity and charging speed. It will be implemented automatically after around 400 charge cycles. Google will contact affected users with instructions.

THE WORLD'S GONE MAD!

Someone should tell this moron there are only two safe places to surf: on the internet and in the sea. He's risking his life by 'tram surfing', a craze among Nottingham's youngsters who film their stupidity and share it on TikTok. Next stop: Accident & Emergency.

Write and edit PDFs on your iPad with Preview app

Apple is adding its Preview app to iPads (see screenshot right), letting you open, edit and write on PDFs on your iPad.

This gives you more advanced PDF-editing options on top of those that already exist in the Files app, and means you may not need to install third-party apps like Adobe Acrobat Reader.

It's part of iPadOS 26, which is expected to arrive in September. Currently, the Preview app is available only in macOS – Apple's operating system for Macs.

Editing PDFs will be done by touch or by using Apple's Pencil stylus, and you'll be able to open PDFs and images in your Files folder from within Preview. Preview will also automatically fill in PDF forms on the iPad.

It's one of several new features in iPadOS 26, including "windowing" which lets you resize web pages and apps by pressing and holding a 'grab' handle at the bottom right then moving it on screen.

Apple also announced iOS 26 for iPhones, which has a feature named Call Screening that asks unknown callers on the other line to provide a reason for their call (pictured right). You can then choose to accept or decline it.

Both operating systems are the first to use Apple's new naming system of using years (26 for 2026) rather than the number version it is. They replace the current versions, which are iPadOS and iOS 18.

Read more on Apple's site: www.snipca.com/55204.

BT says AI might lead to more job cuts in the company than first thought

BT's boss has said the rise of AI might lead the company to cutting even more jobs than the 55,000 it plans to axe by 2030.

Chief executive Allison Kirkby (pictured above) said the current aim of scrapping 55,000 jobs doesn't reflect how AI is transforming the workplace.

She previously thought around 10,000 of the total jobs lost – most in customer service – would be replaced by AI, which Kirkby called a "reshaping" of BT's workforce.

But in June she told the *Financial Times* that this figure "did not reflect the full potential of AI".

She added: "Depending on what we learn from AI... there may be an opportunity for BT to be even smaller by the end of the decade."

Kirkby also said the value of Openreach wasn't reflected in BT's share price and she would consider spinning it off as a separate company if the price didn't rise.

Her comments come as some tech firms are backtracking on moves to replace customer teams with AI. Both short-term loan service Klarna and translation app Duolingo have scaled back AI plans following complaints from customers.

Are you worried about AI taking your job? Let us know: letters@computeractive.co.uk

Amazon doubles Prime Video adverts to six minutes an hour

Amazon has quietly doubled the time dedicated to adverts on Prime Video, according to emails seen by the magazine *Adweek*.

It quoted an email sent by Amazon to a company buying adverts that said: "Prime Video ad load has gradually increased to four to six minutes per hour."

When Amazon started showing adverts in Prime Video in early 2024 it promised to show "meaningfully fewer" ads than rival streaming services.

This was reported as being below three-and-a-half minutes per hour, though this was never confirmed by Amazon. If accurate, it means the time given to adverts has nearly doubled since.

The leaked emails follow Amazon telling *Financial Times* last October that it planned to "ramp up" adverts in 2025.

It's part of a strategy used by most streaming services to force viewers to pay to remove adverts. Amazon charges an extra £2.99 on top of the usual £5.99 monthly Prime Video subscription to watch without ads, taking the total to £8.98 (see www.snipca.com/55173).

If you pay £8.99 for the full Prime package, which includes free next-day delivery as well as Prime Video, removing ads takes your monthly bill to £11.98.

You still need to pay this £2.99 monthly even if you pay £95 for Prime's annual subscription because Amazon doesn't offer an annual option for removing adverts.

Amazon didn't respond directly to *Adweek*'s story, but said in a statement: "While demand continues to grow, our commitment is to improving ad experiences rather than simply increasing the number of ads shown."

Have you noticed more adverts on Amazon Prime Video? Let us know: letters@computeractive.co.uk

'Yuck!' Wikipedia axes AI summaries after editor backlash

Wikipedia has paused a trial that involved using AI to summarise articles following severe criticism from the site's editors.

It had started showing summarised articles on phones and tablets to about 10 per cent of users who have the Wikipedia browser extension installed.

These summaries were marked with a yellow 'unverified' label (1 in our screenshot). Tapping the summary showed the full article below 2.

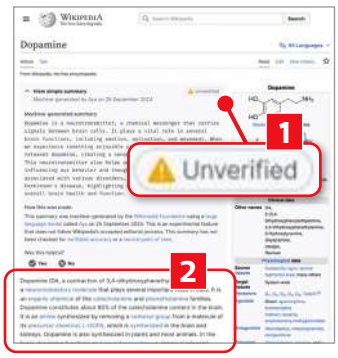
The Wikimedia Foundation, which runs Wikipedia, began the test on 2 June, intending to run it for two weeks. It hoped the "machine-generated" summaries would "take existing Wikipedia text, and simplify it for interested readers" (www.snipca.com/55172).

But it abandoned the trial just two days later after a backlash from editors angry about the use of AI.

The first comment left by an editor was just the word "Yuck". Another warned the trial would do "immediate and irreversible harm to our readers and to our reputation as a decently trustworthy and serious source".

They added: "Let's not insult our readers' intelligence and join the stampede to roll out flashy AI summaries."

Wikimedia responded by saying it welcomed "such thoughtful feedback" and that the summaries were meant to make articles more accessible for people with "different reading levels".



However, it admitted it "could have done a better job introducing this idea" and said it won't add any more AI tools without first consulting editors.

IN BRIEF

VODAFONE LAUNCHES NEW TRAVEL eSIMS

Vodafone has launched a new eSIM service for travelling abroad that covers 206 destinations on 700 networks. It has packages ranging from 1GB to 150GB, and works on 4G and 5G (though the latter only in 98 countries). It's available from https://travel.vodafone.com and also on Android and iOS apps – for details visit www.snipca.com/55162.

FREELY COMES TO ROKU SMART TVS

Streaming service Freely is now available on some smart TVs that use the Roku operating system, including models made by JVC, Metz, Polaroid and Sharp. It becomes the default TV guide on these sets, offering live and catch-up shows from UK broadcasters. However, there are no plans to add it to Roku's streaming devices. Read more at www.snipca.com/55167.

RENT EPSON PRINTERS FOR £6.99 A MONTH

You can now rent Epson printers for £6.99 a month through the company's new ReadyPrint Max service. This price gives you either the ET-2870U (pictured) or ET-M1170U model, letting you print 50 or 100 pages a month respectively. There are several pricing tiers, up to £22.99 for 3,000 pages a month, and more advanced models including features like duplex (two-sided) printing. Minimum subscription period is 18 months. Read more at www.snipca.com/55166.

Will Google force you to give up passwords?

It will have no choice if older people keep ignoring passkeys

When tech firms are finding it hard to persuade the wider public to adopt a technology, they often commission research to 'prove' it's popular among young people. That's almost certainly the point of Google's recent survey showing that 40 per cent of 'Generation Z' in the US (born 1997 to 2012) now use passkeys.

By contrast, only 26 per cent of 'Baby Boomers' (1946-1964) say they use them. Google's hope is that older people will think, 'Wow, those kids always seem to know what's happening – maybe I should ditch passwords too'.

Google's language makes it clear it thinks no one should be using passwords anymore. It says older people are reluctant to move on from such "legacy" security methods.

That use of 'legacy' is telling. Tech firms throw it around to make existing technology feel outdated and clunky, even if it's still working perfectly fine for millions of people. It's a passive-aggressive way of making those users feel out of touch.

And yet even Generation Z doesn't seem ready to give up passwords. Google's survey shows that half still use them. That rises to 72 per cent for Baby Boomers.

Most of these boomers don't use password managers, with 43 per cent writing down their passwords and 14 per cent memorising them. So if passwords really are legacy, no one told the average user.

That won't stop Google and other tech giants from encouraging you to use them. In his blog post on the survey (see www.snipca.com/55271), Evan Kotsovinos, Google's Vice President of Privacy, Safety & Security, said the company "wants to move beyond passwords altogether".

> "If passwords really are 'legacy', nobody told the average user"

He correctly states that using passkeys and 'Sign in with Google' – where you use your Google account to sign into other websites and programs – protects you from phishing attacks.

"Gen Z's embrace of these tools actually represents a big step forward for collective security," he said.

But Kotsovinos doesn't say what Google will actually do to "move beyond passwords". It will probably continue to paint them as a prehistoric option, but generally people become less likely to change habits as they get older. If they've been using passwords for three to four decades, they're not going to change just because it's popular with people 50 years younger.

So we think Google's gentle encouragement will eventually turn into something firmer. At some point, it'll either stop you using passwords altogether, or make it such a hassle that you give up voluntarily.

But if that happens, expect a backlash – and not just from the usual privacy campaigners. It's likely to be louder than the uproar over Microsoft axing Windows 10.

Yet Google, along with Apple, Meta and Microsoft, are so committed to passkeys that they have no choice but to take such drastic action.

The move isn't just about boosting the privacy of users – it also helps companies because it dramatically cuts their support, security and legal costs. They don't want to pay customer-service teams to constantly help users reset forgotten passwords, or settle fines from regulators when security hacks lead to huge leaks online.

The battle over passwords is the latest example of a tech industry thinking it knows what's best for you, and expecting you to take the medicine without complaining.

For now Google and others are still asking you nicely to open wide. But don't mistake politeness for patience. The pressure will only increase until you fall in line.

THE FACTS

- Google has published a survey showing that 40 per cent of young people use passkeys compared with only 26 per cent of older people
- Almost three-quarters of 'Baby Boomers' still use passwords, with 43 per cent writing them down and 14 per cent memorising them
- The company says it wants to "move beyond passwords" and is encouraging people to use passkeys or to sign into sites and apps using their Google account

Protect your tech

Scams and threats to avoid, plus new security tools

WATCH OUT FOR...

HMRC scams following huge data leak

What's the threat?

Security experts have warned about a potential new wave of HMRC scams after it emerged that 100,000 people had their tax details stolen last year, leading to the theft of £47m from taxpayer accounts.

Officials say criminals gained access to the data by tricking organisations that work with HMRC into revealing customers' details. They then accessed or created pay as you earn (PAYE) accounts to fraudulently claim tax repayments.

HMRC wrote to victims between 4 and 25 June to confirm they won't face any financial loss. It has since locked down the affected accounts and reset passwords to prevent further fraud, and has worked with the police to arrest some of those thought to be responsible. It has also removed any incorrect information from tax records to prevent further misuse. Read more at Gov.UK: www.snipca.com/55155.

How can you stay safe?

This is a relatively small theft, affecting just 0.2 per cent of PAYE taxpayers. However, victims are at risk of highly convincing scams. Criminals can use the stolen tax details to pose as HMRC staff – or even impersonate your employer – to make bogus tax-repayment claims. These will look legitimate because they'll have your real tax information.

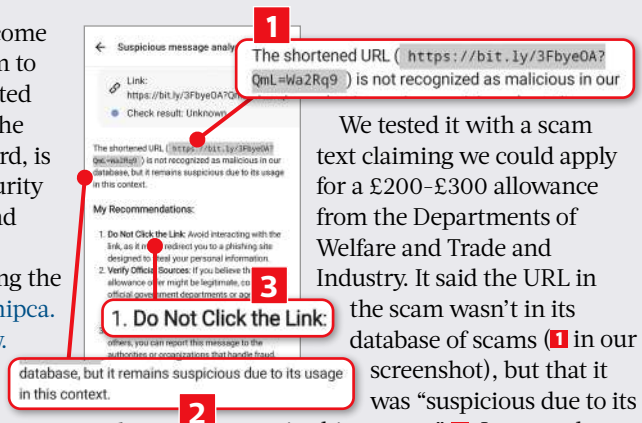
Taxpayers who are unaffected should also be vigilant because scammers are likely to start exploiting concerns about the theft. Scare tactics might include subject lines like 'Have you lost money because of the HMRC hack?' or 'Check if your tax details were stolen'.

These scams may involve the use of fake adverts online, particularly impersonating BBC or Sky news reports, or newspaper articles. Don't be surprised if scammers add credibility to these by using photos or faked videos of respected figures like Martin Lewis.

New tools | Malwarebytes Scam Guard

Malwarebytes has become the latest security firm to let you upload suspected scams for checking. The tool, called Scam Guard, is part of its Mobile Security app – both the free and paid-for versions.

Start by downloading the app (Android www.snipca.com/55153; iOS www.snipca.com/55154) then look for Scam Guard in the Security section and tap Chat followed by 'Start a new chat'. You can now type the content of a potential scam or a dodgy URL and ask for Malwarebytes' verdict. Alternatively, tap one of the bottom-left icons to take a photo of a possible scam or upload a photo you've already taken.


1
The shortened URL (https://bit.ly/3FbyeOA?QmL=Wa2Rq9) is not recognized as malicious in our
Suspicious message analy
Check result: Unknown
My Recommendations:
1. Do Not Click the Link:
3
database, but it remains suspicious due to its usage in this context.
2

We tested it with a scam text claiming we could apply for a £200-£300 allowance from the Departments of Welfare and Trade and Industry. It said the URL in the scam wasn't in its database of scams (1 in our screenshot), but that it was "suspicious due to its usage in this context" 2. It correctly advised not to click the link 3.

This was a decent response from a new tool that will continue to learn about emerging threats as more scams are added to its database. Visit Malwarebytes' blog for more on what it can do: www.snipca.com/55152.

ScamWatch
Readers warn readers

NatWest's 'sleek new design'

Somebody impersonating NatWest sent me an email to say it's "changing the way we look". It said some of its emails would soon "showcase a sleek new design". So what, I thought to myself. Why would NatWest email its customers to communicate this uninteresting piece of news? And why would a mere redesign of emails mean I'd need to click a 'Get Started' button to "re-authenticate" my account? It did contain the correct logo, the bank's corporate colour (purple) and its stunningly nonsensical slogan: 'Tomorrow begins today'. Does it? Nobody told me.

Tony Drabble

Warn your fellow readers about scams at letters@computeractive.co.uk

Letters

Tell us what's on your mind

BT's Smart Hubs are modern abominations

I live in one of the towns (Dursley in Gloucestershire) that has rejected BT's Smart Hubs (pictured below), and I'm glad they have. Dursley is a beautiful old market town, while these Hubs are modern abominations that belong in a seaside arcade. They are hideous.

Also, what's the point of providing internet access when everyone has phones? The answer is that it's an excuse just to show adverts on the screens. That's the real reason BT wants to erect them. It's about making money, not providing a community service.

Geoff Burgess

You pay to watch ITV ads, then again to remove them!

I don't know how Rob Barnes can describe paying £59.99 a year for ITVX Premium as a bargain (Letters, Issue 712). What he didn't mention is that he's already paid £174.50 for the TV licence. It's true that none of this goes to ITV, but you still need it to watch any live TV in the UK. In effect, he's paid £174.50 to *watch* adverts on ITV, then another £59.99 to remove them! What madness.

Chris Holt

Never trust 'lifetime' claims in adverts

As a retired company lawyer, I was interested in your criticism of VPNSecure cancelling its "lifetime" subscriptions (Issue 712, page 21). I regularly had meetings with marketing executives trying to persuade them not to use that word in its adverts. They brazenly admitted that the public would assume it meant for *their* lifetime, even though there was no legal guarantee of this. It was cynical in the extreme.

Thankfully, towards the end of my career enough companies were being sued over misleading lifetime offers that the word became less popular with reckless marketing departments. Personally, if I see that word associated with any company I make a mental note never to use it. More honest and trustworthy is the claim 'Covered for the useful life of the product'.

Francis Smith

Ask Evri for 'actual' delivery location

Like other readers in recent issues, I've had a lot of trouble with Evri deliveries. Several haven't been received in spite of 'Proof of Delivery' photos. Evri encouraged me to install their app and I completed the 'what3words' location and, as suggested extras, I included a picture of the front of my house indicating my safe place.

Recently, a parcel from an online supplier of garden plants and bulbs wasn't delivered. The 'Proof of Delivery' picture Evri sent was obviously not of my property (it showed metal fencing whereas my gate and fence are wooden).

I complained to the supplier, which agreed to replace the plants I ordered. They showed me a map indicating the parcel's 'Actual' location point and the 'Expected' location (my safe place). These two points are 311 metres apart! The actual delivery point looks close to and in full view of a busy road. This information is very useful and should be included automatically as part of the proof of delivery.

I eventually got my plants. They were delivered outside our gate, some 30 metres from my safe place but that was acceptable.

Chris Adam

How to stop headphone dodgers

In Issue 710's 'Named & Shamed' (page 21) Keumars Afifi-Sabet quite rightly moans about 'headphone dodgers' who feel themselves entitled to "share" their musical tastes with the rest of the railway carriage – whether their fellow travellers want to hear their choice of music or not.

Luckily, legislation already exists to put a stop to such behaviour thanks to the copyright laws zealously policed by the Performing Rights Society (PRS) and the Phonographic Performance Ltd (PPL). Anyone who allows or causes creative works to be heard by anyone other than themselves, without the appropriate licence, is liable for fines stretching into the thousands of pounds.

Obviously, getting the individual playing the music reported to the PRS/PPL would be difficult but – although I am no legal expert – I suspect that the train operator, in allowing such a performance to take place on its train, could be equally culpable and, therefore, might be incentivised to ensure that such a situation does not occur.

Incidentally, I believe these rules don't just apply to recorded music, but also to any copyrighted work - thereby putting a potential stop to any singing, too!

Ian David

What's the Issue...?

When was your in-depth look at using Waze during car journeys?

Ian Butters

CA SAYS That was in Issue 692's How To section – page 35.

I'm thinking of buying Netac's US9 1TB portable SSD. When did you review it?

Kathryn Black

CA SAYS In Issue 694, page 26. Read it and the feature above on our 2024 Back Issue USB Stick: www.snipca.com/53180.

I've been reading about Google's plans to let advertisers use 'fingerprint' techniques to track you, and I don't like it. When did you explain how to block it?

Stephen Hazell

CA SAYS In Issue 703, page 60 – buy a back issue from www.snipca.com/55164.

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I catalogued DVD collection using your advice

Pass on my thanks to Robert Irvine for his article on scanning in his book collection (Issue 709, page 74). I had previously dabbled with Libib (www.libib.com) but couldn't make it work.

A friend donated an old USB barcode scanner and like Robert I plugged it into a laptop and started to scan in a few DVDs. Some of these were obscure, but Libib recognised and added them. Almost all the family DVD collection has now been catalogued, so we now know what we own and what we don't need to buy.

I just wish Libib's Basic account (www.snipca.com/54610) would let you batch-edit items.

Morvyn Finch

Try Linux distros before installing them

Many thanks for your recent article on switching from Windows to Linux (Issue 711, page 60). My wife switched to Zorin (https://zorin.com) about three years ago and I switched to Mint (https://linuxmint.com) a few months ago. We find them to be slicker tools that do what we want them to, rather than being driven by Microsoft trying to get us to do what *it* wants us to do.

Dual-booting can be problematic, though, so rather than downloading and installing different distros on your PC, you can try a wide range of them at https://distrosea.com (pictured below).

Ian Henderson

Run Windows 10 safely offline

I use a Windows 11 'All-in-one' PC, but still have my very old laptop that runs Windows 10. However, since an update to my router I've been unable to connect to the internet on this laptop. But I can still use all the software I've installed on it, making it a useful tool. What it can't do is access the internet or send emails. However, most people these days have a smartphone or perhaps a tablet providing access to these services.

If you're prepared to accept this compromise then you don't need to switch to Linux or risk running Windows 11 on a potentially unsuitable PC. Just disconnect from the router and carry on, virus free. If you need to connect to your smartphone there should be little chance of transferring a virus as Android and iPhones are unlikely to be a threat.

Trevor Taylor

CA SAYS **Trevor's right that keeping a Windows 10 computer offline will prolong its life. It eradicates most online threats because the machine won't be exposed to malicious websites, phishing emails or fake adverts.**

But malware can still hitch a ride on any USB sticks or external hard drives you connect, or any file transfers from infected devices. Also, no security updates means any new vulnerabilities found in Windows 10 after support ends won't be fixed. So if you accidentally connect to the internet, or plug in an infected device, you're wide open to attack. And security isn't the only factor. Over time developers will stop updating their Windows 10 software, leaving you stuck on old versions.

It's a decent short-term solution, though – as long as you're extremely disciplined about staying offline. We'll explain it in more detail in our Windows 10 Survival Guide features over the next few months.

STAR LETTER

How I fell victim to SIM-swap scam

I'm glad you highlighted the rising threat of SIM-swap fraud (Issue 712, page 11), because it's both relatively unknown and can happen in a flash. I should know because I fell victim to it one morning in April.

I was expecting some important calls and texts from friends, so had my phone by my side as I watched TV. It was strange that I didn't receive anything for a couple of hours, but I put it down to a dodgy signal (it's often flaky). I then emailed a friend asking why they hadn't called and she said she had but couldn't get through. She had texted also, but I hadn't received those.

I was now very worried. I phoned EE and they said my number had been transferred to a new SIM card, and that the person with this SIM card had received messages intended for me. As some of these were highly sensitive, it made me feel sick.

EE quickly blocked the swapped SIM so the scammer wouldn't get any more messages. But I didn't even know this kind of scam was possible. The person helping me at EE said they had seen a huge rise in them and that most victims hadn't heard of the risk.

Thankfully, it appears that I realised the fraud in enough time to stop the scammers benefitting from it. I don't think I've lost any money and have changed all my passwords. I've also installed Google Authenticator (www.snipca.com/54977) as you advised. I'm taking no chances, though, so have emailed you under a false name.

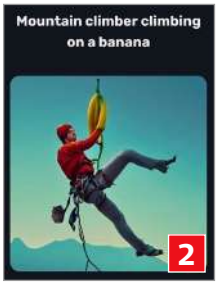
Linda Cook

The **Star Letter** writer wins a **Computeractive** mug!

Is Google split on banana definition?

I was fascinated by Issue 711's Cover Feature comparing AI chatbots. What I use them for mostly is creating pictures of strange things I've described. Here, for example, is Google Gemini's interpretation of "banana climbing a mountain" (screenshot 1 below), which is awfully cute, although the banana is not technically correct. But when I tried it again recently it produced this strange image 2. It turned the words round so it wasn't even able to understand what I was asking for.

Angela Thorne



Consumeractive

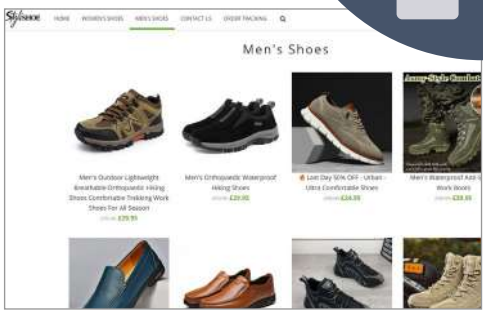
We stand up for your legal rights

Do I have to pay to return shoes to China?

LEAD CASE

Q I recently paid £29.95 (plus £4.80 delivery) through PayPal for a pair of size 12 orthopaedic trainers from Stylishoe (www.stylishoe.com, pictured) because the listing said they came with a wide fitting toe box. But when they arrived, they were far too small. Stylishoe says I must return the shoes, at my expense, to China. Is this right?

Bill Simmons



A It certainly doesn't sound right. Retailers can only demand that you pay to return goods if you've rejected them because you've changed your mind. But the trainers Bill bought aren't as described, and so he can return them under the Consumer Rights Act and ask Stylishoe to cover the cost of postage.

Bill's not the only customer to have been let down by Stylishoe. Recent reviews on Trustpilot complain of shoes being the wrong size and the company not responding to emails. Seventy per cent of its reviews are for one star – see www.snipca.com/55138.

Bill said he saw a London address for Stylishoe on its website, but we can only find one for Wyoming, USA. After some digging we discovered it's registered at 4th Floor, 205 Regent Street, London, England, W1B 4HB. This is most likely a virtual office or PO box address, not a geographical address. Wherever it's based, Stylishoe is selling to customers in the UK and so must abide by UK law.

At no point before purchase does the site say you'll have to return goods to China. It also says you have only 24 hours after ordering in which to cancel an order, which is a breach of the Consumer Contract Regulations. We've explained all this to Stylishoe, but it hasn't responded to our emails.

We've told Bill to file a claim with PayPal for goods not as described (www.snipca.com/55140). On our advice he's also going to complain to Trading Standards via Citizens Advice: www.snipca.com/55139.

CASE ONGOING

Virgin is overcharging me – should I cancel direct debit?

Q Virgin Media totally messed up my billing when I signed a new contract. Instead of the £98.50 a month we agreed, it wants to take £259.68 in my next bill. When I complained, Virgin cut the bill to £168.38 with a credit, but this makes no sense. I might cancel my direct debit, but will I get in trouble?

Emily Jenkins

A No, Emily should be fine to cancel the direct debit. Internet providers prefer you to pay by direct debit, often shaving a couple of quid off the monthly bill if you set one up. But unless it's set out in the terms and conditions of her contract, there's no legal requirement for Emily to have a direct debit to pay for her Virgin services.

However, we spoke to Virgin and it agreed the billing was incorrect. It said it would apply another credit to her account, reducing the payment to £98.50. But if Virgin doesn't confirm this with Emily, we wouldn't blame her for still cancelling the direct debit. As long as she pays the agreed £98.50 on the expected date, there shouldn't be any problems.

CASE CLOSED

CASE UPDATE

Plusnet finally refunds reader for 2024 broadband failure

Plusnet has finally compensated reader Gerald Razey for leaving him without broadband for two months at the start of 2024 (see Issue 695).

Gerald didn't know about Ofcom's scheme that obliges all broadband and landline companies to pay compensation for days without a service, but this shouldn't have mattered. Once you report a fault it's up to the company to refund you without you having to chase it. It then has 30 days to compensate you.

At the time providers had to pay £9.76 for every day they left a service unrepaired. Plusnet eventually calculated this as £440, much more than the pathetic £50 it offered him before he contacted us. It was only after we applied some pressure that the company reconsidered his case. Since then, Ofcom has increased the amount to £9.98.

Providers must also pay £31.19 for a missed appointment and £6.24 for failing to miss the start date for a new service (Ofcom explains more about this at www.snipca.com/55144).

Gerald says he's now happy with the outcome, but if he felt he was owed more he could take the matter to the Communications Ombudsman for review (www.commsombudsman.org). Plusnet would have to abide by its decision.

Should AMD have told me chip won't work with Windows 11?

Q In 2019, I bought an AMD Ryzen 7 2700X eight-core processor (pictured), which I used to build a PC. However, I've discovered it isn't suitable for Windows 11 and can't be upgraded. Why didn't AMD issue warnings when this became apparent in 2019, and has it breached UK consumer law?

Jim O'Rourke

A No, AMD hasn't broken UK law because it never said the processor would work with Windows 11.

Indeed, there's no way it could have made this claim because Microsoft didn't announce Windows 11 until June 2021, three years after AMD released the Ryzen 7 2700X.

AMD would almost certainly have been aware of Microsoft's strict requirements for upgrading to Windows 11 before the company announced them, but not as early as 2019 when Jim bought the processor.

The company would have broken the law if it had incorrectly claimed the processor would work with a specific version of Windows, or was in some way "future-proofed" to work with all forthcoming versions. But neither AMD nor its main rival Intel are likely to make such a blatant error. Microsoft has a list of which processors are compatible with each Windows build at www.snipca.com/55141.

CASE CLOSED

Do I have to pay to insure delivery of goods?

Q I thought any insurance for goods bought online would be included in the original delivery costs. If I refuse to pay for this when ordering and the product never arrives, does this mean I've lost my money and the goods?

Steve O'Connor

A No, Steve wouldn't lose his money – and he's right that this kind of insurance is usually built into the delivery cost.

It's not illegal for sites to ask customers to pay for extra insurance, but we think it's cynically designed to shift responsibility for failed delivery to the customer. The seller is always responsible for ensuring safe delivery of goods you've bought, regardless of whether you've paid to insure them (see Section 29 of the Consumer Rights Act 2015, www.snipca.com/55143). Retailers can't argue that your purchase of insurance means that it's your responsibility to chase lost or damaged goods.

The only other time a seller could argue that it's not responsible is if you refuse to use the courier it chooses, and ask for another. So, typically, the responsibility only shifts to you when the goods are received. This is one reason we'd advise caution when designating a safe place for delivery. If a seller can prove it was delivered there – and it subsequently went missing – you bear responsibility for finding out what happened to it.

CASE CLOSED

CREDIT WHERE IT'S DUE

Mesh helped me upgrade my PC to Windows 11 Pro

Four years ago, I purchased a computer running Windows 10 Pro direct from Mesh Computers (www.meshcomputers.com). It has run flawlessly ever since. Recently, I received an email from Mesh reminding me that Microsoft will end support for Windows 10 in October, and asking me to check my computer's compatibility to upgrade to Windows 11.

I contacted Mesh's technical department, which advised that I would need to enable the TPM firmware in the BIOS before the upgrade would work. They gave detailed instructions on how to achieve this.

I was then able to download Windows 11 Pro from Microsoft's site (www.snipca.com/55137) and am pleased to say the upgrade went smoothly. I feel that Mesh's actions and customer service were first class, and deserve to be recognised.

John Fullerton

Has a company impressed you with its customer service? Please let us know: editor@computeractive.co.uk

Contact
Mesh

- **Email** TechHQ@meshcomputers.com
- **Tel** 020 4506 5321

Grow Your Family Tree

If you're looking for free transcriptions and help from volunteers, follow **Richard Holt's** advice to...

Search for online parish clerks

Online parish clerks (OPCs) are volunteers who collect, transcribe and publish parish records online that are free to search. Many counties have their own OPC websites, packed with data you won't find on the big commercial genealogy sites. If you're tracing your roots, these are goldmines hiding in plain sight.

Find an OPC site for your area

To see if there's an OPC project for your county or parish, start with the list on UK BMD (www.snipca.com/55175). You'll also find plenty of free transcripts outside the OPC network by searching GENUKI (www.genuki.org.uk).

Another excellent resource is FreeREG – part of FreeUKGenealogy – which offers online transcripts of parish and nonconformist registers (www.freereg.org.uk). The best OPC sites are shown in the box below left.

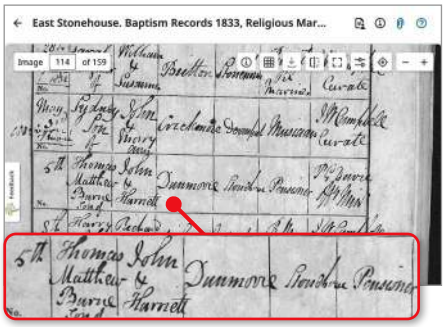
As with any volunteer-run project, some OPC sites are more detailed than others. Some have transcripts online, while others ask you to contact the local volunteer. Many OPCs welcome questions and are happy to search their records for you. Once you've found a parish with an OPC, check which records and resources they offer. The Lancashire OPC site, for example, has many Catholic registers you won't find elsewhere.

Best online parish clerk websites

- **Cornwall** www.opc-cornwall.org
- **Devon** www.snipca.com/55176
- **Dorset** www.opcdorset.org
- **Kent** https://kent-opc.org
- **Lancashire** www.lan-opc.org.uk
- **Sussex** www.sussex-opc.org
- **Warwickshire** www.snipca.com/55177
- **Wiltshire** www.wiltshire-opc.org.uk

How an OPC solved my name puzzle

Nearly 10 years ago, I contacted the OPC who covered the Charles the Martyr parish in Plymouth. I was trying to find out more about my third-great-grandfather, Thomas Matthew Buyrns (1832–1909). Most census records gave his birthplace as Plymouth, but the 1861 census showed Edmonton, Middlesex.


East Stonehouse. Baptism Records 1833, Religious Mar...
Image 114 of 159
5th Thomas John Matthew Burne Harriett Dunmore Pensioner

An online parish clerk helped Richard find the baptism for his third great-grandfather Thomas Matthew Burne Dunmore

I found a possible 1841 census entry for Thomas in Edmonton, where his parents were named Matthew and Harriet Burns (not Buyrns). Matthew's occupation was 'Navy Pensioner' which suggested a connection to Plymouth. The children in the household matched Thomas' siblings I'd found using their marriage records. Despite this, I couldn't establish a connection to Plymouth.

The OPC couldn't locate the surname Buyrns in their transcripts, but suggested a different surname: Dunmore. Things started to fall into place after I found a catalogue entry among Greenwich Hospital School's admission papers at The National Archives. It was for Thomas Matthew Buyrn Dunmore, but it said he was the son of John Dunmore – *not* Matthew Burns – and Harriet Dunmore.

The OPC found baptisms for children of John and Harriet Dunmore in East Stonehouse, Devon, that matched the names of Thomas and his siblings – including one for Thomas Matthew Burne Dunmore on 5 May 1833 (see screenshot above). This was the third spelling of the surname.

I finally solved the puzzle by discovering John Dunmore and Matthew Burns were the same person. Matthew had joined the Royal Marines in 1812 using the name John Dunmore. It was only by working with the OPC that I solved this puzzle.

Your **Genealogy** Problems Solved

Can you help me trace the death certificate of Charles Traynor who died in a house fire on 21 December, 1890, at 27 St Anne's Court, Dean Street in London's Soho? I found this information in the *Illustrated Police News*.

Gary Wild

First I searched for 'Charles Traynor' in FreeBMD (www.freebmd.org.uk), selecting the dates Dec 1890 to Mar 1891 in case the death was registered in the following quarter, and the district 'Westminster (Sep 1870-Jun1913)'. When this produced no results, I used a wildcard search, changing the surname field to Tr*. This gave me one result for Charles Trayner (not Traynor) which is likely to be the person you want. The details are: Charles Trayner, December 1890, Age 50, Westminster, Volume 1a, Page 394 - see www.snipca.com/55158.

Have a genealogy question for Richard? Email letters@computeractive.co.uk with 'Grow Your Family Tree' in the subject line.

Next issue: Discover if your ancestor was a nurse

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Best Free Software

Robert Irvine recommends new programs that won't cost you a thing

AI ASSISTANT

WiseX 1.01

www.snipca.com/55260
What you need: Windows 10 or 11

From the company behind the free software Wise Disk Cleaner and Wise Program Uninstaller (see page 51 of our Cover Feature), WiseX is a new AI assistant you can use on your desktop. Rather than limit you to its own set of large language models (LLMs), it lets you switch between multiple AI tools without having to open their apps or websites.

Options include OpenAI's GPT 4-o, Google's Gemini 2.5 Pro and the Chinese-owned DeepSeek. The latter may raise eyebrows, but by accessing the LLM through WiseX (without a DeepSeek account), you'll avoid the privacy concerns surrounding the DeepSeek app and website. Several AI tools, including Hugging Face and Brave Leo, also provide independent access to DeepSeek.

To use WiseX, simply type a query or command into the message box and click Send. Depending on the model you've selected, it can search the web to provide up-to-date answers and analyse files you upload.

Its AI models include useful tools for working with images, such as generating pictures from text prompts, erasing unwanted objects and people, and removing backgrounds. These generally work well, though images you upload must be under 10MB in size and 2048x2048 pixels in resolution.

WiseX is free to use, after you create an account and enter a verification code. However, certain AI models place limits on how many requests they'll process for free. After that, they require tokens for which you need to purchase credits. WiseX gives you five complimentary credits, which doesn't sound like much, but as most tokens use only 0.1 credits it's enough to decide whether you like the program. Further credits cost from $1 (89p) for 10 via PayPal.

It's early days for WiseX, and we experienced a few errors and noticed some spelling mistakes in its options ('Photo Restioration', for example). But it's fun to play around with and, if you don't get the answer you need from one AI model, just switch to another.

Gemini-2.5 Pro
1
2
3
4
What is the weather like today in Ayr in Scotland?
Okay, let's check the weather for Ayr, Scotland, for today, June 20, 2025.
According to the latest forecasts:
AccuWeather indicates it will be "Partly sunny, warm, pleasant" with a high of 77°F (around 25°C) and a low tonight of 63°F (around 17°C). The night is expected to be "Mainly clear and warm."
Source: AccuWeather - Ayr Forecast
The Met Office forecasts a maximum daytime temperature of 26°C and a minimum nighttime temperature of 17°C for today.
Source: Met Office - Ayr Forecast
BBC Weather states that this morning will see variable cloud and sunshine. In the afternoon, some clouds will form, which may bring the odd light shower. It's expected to be humid and very warm or hot. Tonight is expected to continue predominantly cloudy with a few light spots of rain possible, with clearer spells developing towards dawn.
Source: BBC Weather - Ayr and BBC Weather - Ayr Today
So, it looks like a generally warm and pleasant day in Ayr, with a mix of sun and cloud, and a chance of a light shower in the afternoon. It will be quite warm, with highs around 25-26°C.
What is Computeractive?
What is the biggest bird?
Create a photo of a caterpillar...
Analyse this document
Type your question here...

1 Click the dropdown menu at the top to choose from over 20 AI models. These include GPT-4o, Gemini 2.5 Pro and DeepSeek (plus some other Chinese LLMs), and tools for generating, enhancing and removing unwanted elements from images.

2 Delete a chat from WiseX by hovering your cursor over it and clicking the bin icon, or wipe all your conversations by clicking Clear History. See our feature on page 60 for more advice about deleting your data from AI tools to protect your privacy.

3 Click the globe icon above the message box to activate web search for the current AI model, so you can get up-to-date information. Click the paperclip icon to upload a file from your hard drive and ask the AI tool about its content.

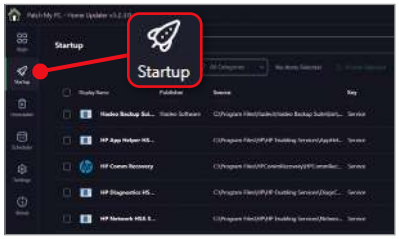
4 To check how many free credits you have left from the five that WiseX gives you, click your profile icon in the top-right corner. When you hit your quota, click the Buy Credits link to get more - prices start from $1 (89p) for 10 credits.

SOFTWARE UPDATER

Patch My PC Home Updater 5.2.3

www.snipca.com/55261

What you need: Windows 10 or 11



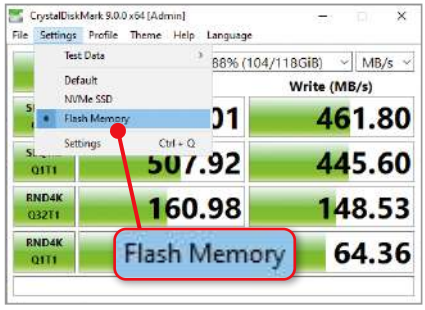
Following our Workshop in Issue 712 (page 38), Patch My PC has been updated again to make it even better at managing software. The big new feature is a startup manager, which you access by clicking Startup in the left-hand toolbar (see screenshot). This lists all the tools that launch automatically when you start Windows and lets you disable them with a single click. Doing so will help your PC boot faster and stop unnecessary background processes slowing it down. You can re-enable programs if you change your mind. Another new option lets you remove portable tools (that aren't actually installed) from the Apps and Uninstaller tabs by right-clicking them. Patch My PC has added support for further software, including Wise Video Converter and Microsoft's PC Health Check.

BENCHMARKING TOOL

CrystalDiskMark

www.snipca.com/55262

What you need: Windows 7, 8.1, 10 or 11



CrystalDiskMark tests the read and write speeds of hard drives, SSDs and external drives, so you can check if they're becoming slower over time. It performs four tests to verify how fast your drive can read and write both sequential and random data. The latest version reduces the default number of times these four tests are carried out, from five to three. This will save you time while still providing accurate results, but you can increase it to nine if you prefer. CrystalDiskMark has also added a setting for testing the flash memory in SSDs, USB sticks and SD cards. Click the Settings menu and choose Flash Memory (see screenshot) to adjust its tests accordingly. Although it's a great program, CrystalDiskMark has a confusing website, so we recommend downloading it from www.snipca.com/55263 instead.

£ SHOULD I PAY FOR...?

Choose the right version of software

Macrorit Disk Scanner Pro

www.snipca.com/55264

Price: £17.78 **Free trial period:** N/A

What you need: Windows 7, 8.1, 10 or 11

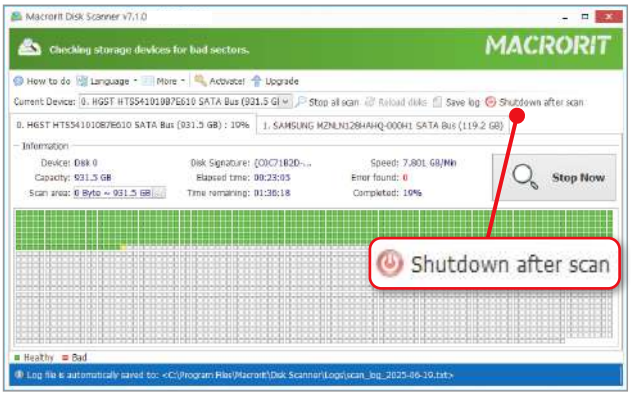
Rather than test the speed of your drives like CrystalDiskMark (see below left), Macrorit Disk Scanner checks for bad sectors. These are areas that can no longer store data, which can result in files becoming lost and unreadable, and affect the speed and reliability of your system.

Both the Free and Pro editions perform thorough scans of your hard drive or SSD, and provide a visual map. This marks bad sectors in red and healthy ones in green. The Pro version has the advantage of scanning multiple drives at the same time, to save you having to check them individually.

However, it's important to note that neither edition – or the pricier Macrorit Disk Scanner Unlimited, which costs £94 – actually *fixes* bad sectors. Instead, they merely tell you if a drive is putting your data at risk so you can replace it.

This makes Macrorit Disk Scanner a useful tool to add to your arsenal of PC-maintenance software, but also highlights that it's not worth paying for. Other than multiple-disk scanning, the only extra feature it offers is automatic shutdown once a scan is complete (see screenshot).

Because scans take a long time, this option means you can leave the program running while you get on with other things and let it turn off your PC for you. But as you're unlikely to use Macrorit Disk Scanner very often, it's hardly essential.



OUR VERDICT: Don't pay for it

Macrorit Disk Scanner offers a reliable way to detect bad sectors on your hard drives. But the only features in the Pro version not available for free are scanning several drives at once and automatic shutdown.

What should I download?

We advise you which software and apps to use

Can I convert my old recordable DVDs?

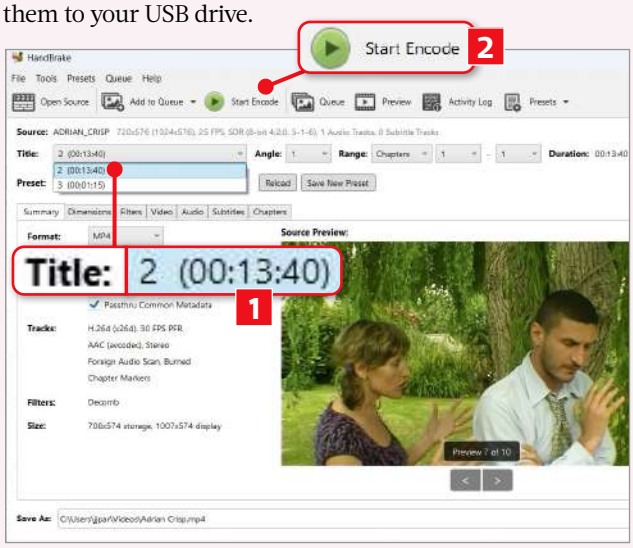
Q Back in the 1990s and 2000s I recorded our family life both on video cassettes and 3in DVDs, then transferred the footage to recordable DVDs. At the time I could play these on DVD players connected to a TV, but no longer. Is there any software that would miraculously make these discs playable again? And can I back up the footage to a USB drive?

Pete Maule

A Your best option is to use Handbrake (https://handbrake.fr) to convert your DVD home movies to MP4 files. You'll need a DVD drive for this – few PCs come with these built in any more, but you can pick up a cheap external drive online, such as the Hitachi-LG GP60 (around £25 from www.snipca.com/55075).

Connect your DVD drive via USB, insert your home-movie disc, then launch Handbrake. You may be prompted to install .Net Runtime when you first run Handbrake (if it's not already installed). Once Handbrake has launched, click your DVD in the Source Selection pane on the left. The default settings will convert your video to MP4, so leave these unchanged.

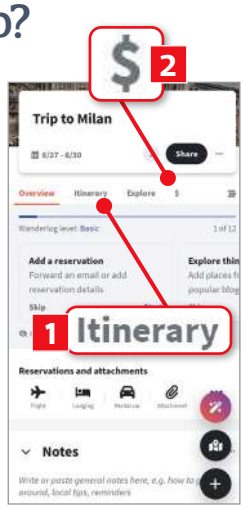
If your disc contains multiple video clips, select the first one from the Title dropdown menu (1 in our screenshot), then click Start Encode 2 to begin converting. Do the same for any other clips listed under Title. Your files will be saved to the Videos folder – from here you can drag them to your USB drive.



What's the best replacement for Vacation Planner app?

Q One of my favourite apps is Vacation Planner, but I can't transfer it from my Samsung Tab S8 tablet to my Galaxy S25 Ultra phone – and it's no longer available on Google Play Store. What's the best replacement?

Alan Haire



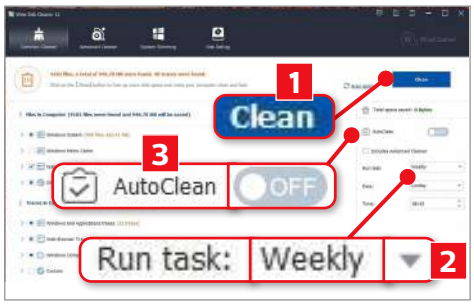
A Try Wanderlog (https://wanderlog.com) and TripIt (www.tripit.com). Both have free versions and work on Android devices, including the Samsung Galaxy S25 Ultra. TripIt is perhaps a little more straightforward, but Wanderlog has lots of useful features, including the ability to create a detailed Itinerary (1 in our screenshot) and track your expenses 2.

What should I use to remove files from my PC?

Q You've recommended all the following programs in the past: BleachBit, PC Manager, Privacy Eraser, Winaero Tweaker and Wise Disk Cleaner. But which one should I use to delete files? Should I run all of them – or just one?

Elizabeth Hojlund

A They're all good, but you only need to use one. BleachBit and Privacy Eraser are both powerful, but they should be used with caution to avoid accidentally deleting important files. Winaero Tweaker is more for changing specific Windows settings. Wise Disk Cleaner (www.snipca.com/55179) is definitely the easiest to use. Run it, leave the settings on their defaults, then click Scan. When it's finished, click Clean (1 in our screenshot). To wipe junk automatically, set a schedule 2 then turn on AutoClean 3 (which will turn from grey to green).



Named & Shamed

Keumars Afifi-Sabet puts the boot into tech villains, jargon-spouting companies and software trying to trick you

SOFTWARE WARNING!

Win Master for Cleaner's ccheeky trick

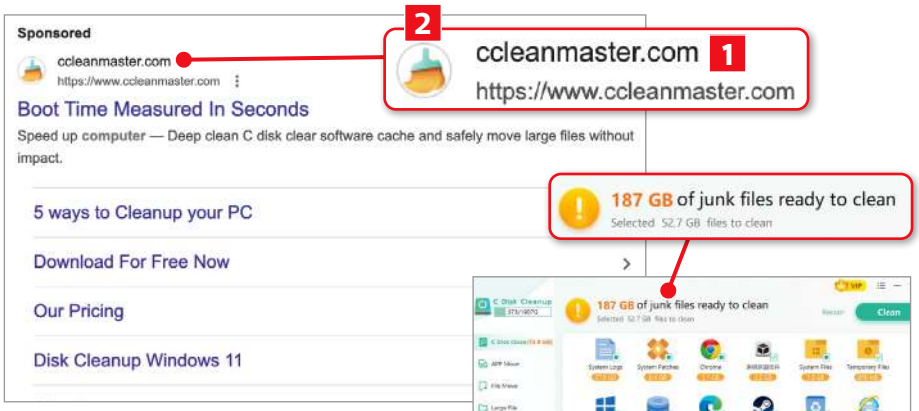
If you're looking for a new junk-cleaning tool, never search for one on Google. The results are littered with so many dodgy sponsored links that anything truly useful gets lost.

One especially shameless example is this sponsored entry, which looks like it's for a tool called Ccleanmaster (1 in our screenshot right) but actually leads to the awkwardly named program 'Win Master for Cleaner'. Made by 'Hong Kong master science and technology Limited' (no, us neither), it claims to be "one app to fix it all".

Sounds promising. But look again at that URL in the grab: www.ccleanmaster.com. Spot the double c? Remind you of anything? Yes, it's a brazen attempt to make you think of CCleaner, which is still one of the world's most popular junk-cleaning programs despite going downhill since Avast bought it in 2017. Just in case you didn't get the hint, its brush logo 2 mimics CCleaner's.

Worse, the name is just one letter away from Clean Master, a completely different tool made by Chinese developer Cheetah Mobile, which Google banned from the Play Store for clicking on their own adverts (known as click fraud – see www.snipca.com/55182). And yep, Clean Master's logo is a brush too.

So, to clarify, 'Win Master for Cleaner' hopes to gain your trust by imitating two of the least trusted tools available. The first thing it did after installing was offer me 20 per cent off. It then told me that nearly two-thirds of the files on my PC (187GB) were junk. This was clearly nonsense, unless it had counted itself many times over. For better junk cleaners see our answer to Elizabeth Hojlund's question on page 20.


Sponsored
ccleanmaster.com
https://www.ccleanmaster.com
Boot Time Measured In Seconds
Speed up computer — Deep clean C disk clear software cache and safely move large files without impact.
5 ways to Cleanup your PC
Download For Free Now
Our Pricing
Disk Cleanup Windows 11
2
ccleanmaster.com 1
https://www.ccleanmaster.com
187 GB of junk files ready to clean
Selected 52.7 GB files to clean
187 GB of junk files ready to clean
Clean

The URL and logo mimics both CCleaner and Clean Master PC

'Win Master for Cleaner' found a highly improbable 187GB of junk files on Keumars' PC

WHAT ARE THEY TALKING ABOUT?

WHAT THEY SAY

Apple on its new software design
www.snipca.com/55174

"Controls are crafted out of Liquid Glass and act as a distinct functional layer that sits above apps. They give way to content and dynamically morph as users need more options or move between different parts of an app. And with thoughtful groupings, it's easier for users to find the controls they need."

WHAT THEY MEAN

We've thoughtfully grouped all the jargon we know to make our design sound more important than it really is.

KEUMARS' VILLAIN OF THE FORTNIGHT

TikTok 'addict' Katherine Greenall

We understand how addiction to drink and drugs can be expensive, but TikTok? We thought that was free. But Katherine Greenall, a 29-year old mum of two from St Helens, said she was so hooked on the video app that she stole almost £443,000 from her employer.

She spent the money on tokens to reward creators of TikTok videos. These are virtual gifts like confetti, hearts and roses, which creators can convert into real cash. And she didn't hold back, splashing £300,000 purely for her own entertainment. The rest she spent on holidays, hotels and purchases from Amazon.

Her former company, which buys vehicles for private and commercial clients, will need more than tokens of support to survive. Greenall, meanwhile, was sentenced to 28 months for fraud.

MINI PC | **£749** from Geekom www.snipca.com/55131

Geekom AX8 Pro

Light touch

The Geekom AX8 Pro is even smaller than your average mini PC. Compared with our current favourite (the GMKtec NucBox K11, £700 from www.snipca.com/54341, reviewed in Issue 707) it shaves a significant 2cm off the height and depth, and another 1cm off the width.

It's certainly thin and light enough to easily attach to the back of a monitor with the included VESA mounting bracket, while its cool, blue-toned metal finish give it a classy feel.

> "A tiny PC that's great for Windows work and web browsing, but is a bit pricey"

To get the case this small (38.5x117x 111mm, HxWxD), Geekom has used a less powerful processor – the AMD Ryzen 7 8845HS – that doesn't require as much space for cooling as the K11's Ryzen 9 8945HS, which has more cores and is better suited to heavier workloads. The AX8 Pro does have fans inside the case, but you'll need to really push it to its limits to hear them kick in.

That said, the AX8 remains a very capable PC. In our benchmark tests it ran only a couple of per cent slower than the K11. However, this dropped further in graphical tests, so we wouldn't recommend this – or any other mini PC – if your main focus is on gaming or editing videos.

The processor is supported by 32GB of RAM and a 1TB SSD, which are easily enough to run the preinstalled copy of Windows 11 Pro, particularly if it's mostly going to be used for web browsing and office work.

There are plenty of ports dotted around the device, including two USB-C (one is USB 4.0-compatible, the other runs at USB 3.2 Gen 2x2 speed), three standard USB 3.2 and one USB 2.0 port. It would have been nice to have one of the USB-C ports on the front panel, rather than both being on the rear, but that's more of an inconvenience than a serious problem. There is also a 2.5Gb Ethernet port and two HDMI sockets, which make it easy to connect to a wired network and a couple of monitors.

While the AX8's port selection is generous enough, it's trumped again by the K11's connections, which include two USB 4.0 ports (one of which is on the front) and an OCuLink port that can be used to connect an external graphics card to upgrade the device's graphics capabilities.

The biggest problem with the AX8 Pro is that it costs £49 more than the K11, despite being slightly less powerful and lacking some of its more useful features. Overall then, the NucBox K11, provides more power and potential for expansion at a lower price.

SPECIFICATIONS

Eight-core AMD Ryzen 7 8845HS processor • 32GB RAM • AMD Radeon 780M graphics • 1TB SSD • Wi-Fi 6E • Bluetooth 5.2 • 1x 2.5Gb Ethernet port • 2x HDMI ports • 2x USB-C ports (1x USB 4.0, 1x USB 3.2 Gen 2) • 3x USB 3.2 Gen 2 ports • 1x USB 2.0 port • Windows 11 Pro • 38.5x117x111mm (HxWxD) • 558g • Three-year warranty www.snipca.com/55131

VERDICT A small, capable mini PC, that performs basic tasks well, but can't beat our favourite

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE

GMKtec NucBox K11 £700
This is larger but cheaper, and its powerful processor means it can handle more demanding tasks

TABLET | **£799** from Microsoft www.snipca.com/55142

Microsoft Surface Pro 12in

Stay in touch

The last three versions of Microsoft's Surface tablet have cost over £1,000, and were designed to rival Apple's iPad Pro range, which starts at £999. Microsoft has dropped the price of this latest version to £799, bringing it in line with the 128GB version of Apple's cheaper iPad Air. For anyone looking for a tablet with Windows 11 rather than iPadOS or Android, it now represents much better value.

> "A Windows 11 tablet that's cheaper and easier to use, but you may still need a keyboard"

At its heart is an eight-core Qualcomm Snapdragon X Plus processor, along with 16GB of RAM and a 256GB SSD. Windows performance is smooth when you consider a tablet is not the operating system's natural habitat. It worked particularly well with multiple apps open at the same time – even if using a touchscreen to switch between them takes a little getting used to when you normally use a keyboard and mouse.

However, this feels like an effort worth making and you'll soon be running most tasks and actions via the touchscreen thanks to large, easy-to-tap icons and buttons. Note, this uses an ARM-based processor, which has its own version of Windows, so you need to check the software you'd want to run on it will work properly. Qualcomm has a list of compatible software at www.snipca.com/54033, or you can search the database at https://windowsonarm.org to check specific titles.

While the touchscreen is smooth and responsive, Windows still works best with a keyboard and cursor if you want to get serious work done. If that's important to you, the optional Surface Pro 12in Keyboard (pictured above) costs an extra £150 and offers a tactile, comfortable, full-size keyboard and trackpad, while also doubling as a protective cover for the screen.

The 12in screen on the Surface Pro has a resolution of 2196x1464 pixels and a refresh rate of 90Hz. It isn't as sharp or bright as an iPad screen, but you're unlikely to notice unless you hold the two side by side. The bezels around the edge are a little thicker than we'd like but you're unlikely to notice in use.

The battery life is superb, lasting nearly 18 hours in our video-playback test. That's up there with the best laptops around, and is better than the 10 hours you'd get from an iPad Air.

SPECIFICATIONS

Eight-core Qualcomm Snapdragon X Plus processor • 45 TOPS • 16GB RAM • Qualcomm Adreno graphics • 12in 2196x1464-pixel 90Hz touchscreen • 256GB SSD • 2x USB-C ports • Wi-Fi 7 • Bluetooth 5.4 • Windows 11 Home • 190x274x7.8mm (HxWxD) • 686g • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/55142

HOW WE TEST

Computeractive is owned by Future PLC, which employs a team of specialist technical reviewers. You'll often read references to our benchmark testing, which is a method of assessing products using the same criteria. For example, we test the speed of every PC and the battery life of every phone and tablet in exactly the same way. This makes our reviews authoritative, rigorous and accurate.

Future PLC also owns the magazines *PC Pro*, *T3* and *What Hi-Fi*, and the websites Laptop Mag (www.laptopmag.com), TechRadar (www.techradar.com) and Windows Central (www.windowscentral.com). This means we can test thousands of products before choosing the most relevant for *Computeractive*.

FAIR AND IMPARTIAL

Our writers follow strict guidelines to ensure the reviews are fair and impartial. The manufacturer has no involvement in our tests.

OUR AWARDS

We award every product that gets five stars our Buy It! stamp of approval. It means we were extremely impressed by the product, and we think you will be too.

Every product that gets a four-star review is given the Recommended award. We highly recommend these products, although they just fail to meet the high standard of our Buy It! winners.

PRICES

Our reviews contain a link to the best price we found online at the time of press.

VERDICT Microsoft brings Windows 11 to a tablet with a fine balance of performance and price

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Apple iPad Air 11in £599 Slightly smaller and with less storage space, but Apple's cheapest iPad Air is slicker to use if you can live with mobile apps

PRINTER | **£250** from Argos www.snipca.com/55156

Brother DCP-T780DW

Hit the bottle

Epson, HP and Canon have been offering refillable ink-tank printers for years, so it was perhaps inevitable that Brother would eventually follow their lead. This multi-function model is the first from the company to come with ink bottles – to get you going there's two with black ink, which are good for around 15,000 pages, and a set of colour bottles capable of producing 5,000 pages. That's more startup cartridges than you'd typically get and Brother's retail prices for refills are competitive – replacement bottles work out at around 0.2p per mono page and 0.4p for a colour page.

> "Low running costs, detailed prints and speedy output"

This three-in-one device prints, scans and copies - functions that can be controlled using buttons on the tiltable control panel and small colour screen on the front. You can connect your devices via Wi-Fi or USB.

At its base you'll find a generous 250-sheet paper cassette with a simple output tray above it. On top there's an automatic document feeder (ADF). The printer supports duplex (double-sided) operation, but the scanner doesn't, so you can't make automated double-sided copies or scans.

The system is similar to many of its rivals, with four ink tanks incorporated into the main body with stoppers at the top. However, here the tank openings sit at an unusual angle, which is intended to help the bottle fully disgorge its contents by helping the air flow in as the ink pours out. This does make filling the tanks a bit trickier, though, and we did spill a drop or two of ink during the filling process.

The setup process on a Windows PC is straightforward – simply install the usual drivers and Brother's handy iPrint&Scan app. The latter provides easy access to all the printer's functions and firmware updates. When everything is installed the printer shouldn't need anything except blank paper for several thousand pages.

It's immediately obvious that this is a speedy printer. During testing it was very quick to start, delivering a first page of text in just seven seconds, even after sitting idle for a while. It went on to deliver 16 pages per minute (ppm) of black text – strangely it was no faster in draft mode.

Inevitably, colour printing wasn't as quick, especially on our taxing 24-page graphics test. All the same, the printer managed 7.1ppm, which is nifty for a compact ink-tank model.

While this certainly isn't a dedicated photo printer, it made a decent job of printing on photo paper without borders up to A4. It took seven and a half minutes to print six postcard-sized photos, and delivered two 10x8in photos on A4 paper in just 13 minutes 20 seconds.

Tested over Wi-Fi, the DCP-T780DW's scanner previewed an A4 page in nine seconds and captured it at 150 dpi in 10 seconds. At a middling 300dpi the same job was completed in 14 seconds. Capturing a 6x4in photo took 24 seconds at a high 600dpi or 80 seconds at the maximum 1,200dpi – that's a slightly faster than typical result.

Combining a swift printer and scanner usually results in rapid copies, and that was mostly the case here. It delivered single mono copies in 14 seconds, and colour ones in 21 seconds. Using the ADF, a stack of 10 mono copies was completed in 86 seconds, although in colour the same job needed three minutes.

On the quality front, black text wasn't as dark as we'd like, and we found that colour prints lacked impact, looking slightly faded even when freshly deposited on the page. Using a magnifying glass we could see that text outlines weren't especially crisp, though they did appear fine to the naked eye. We were pleasantly surprised by the excellent photo quality, however. Colours were slightly too warm, especially on pale skin tones, but photos were crisp and detailed.

SPECIFICATIONS

A4 3-in-1 multifunction ink-tank printer • Uses four bottle inks (black, cyan, magenta and yellow) • 250-sheet paper capacity • 1200x6000 dpi print resolution • USB and Wi-Fi connections • 183x390x343mm • 7.9kg • Three-year warranty www.snipca.com/55156

VERDICT A feature-packed ink-tank printer that delivers decent prints at speed for a reasonable price

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Epson EcoTank ET-1810 £150 If you don't need a scanner, copier, paper tray and double-sided printing, this ink tank printer costs £100 less

ROUTER | **£170** from Currys www.snipca.com/55194

Acer Predator Connect T7

Band aid

Acer has several Wi-Fi routers on the market and the Predator Connect T7 sits right at the top of the range. It's a fully featured, tri-band Wi-Fi 7 model, capable of functioning either as a standalone unit or as part of a mesh system if you live in a larger house and buy more than one.

At 212mm tall its rigidly rectangular case is quite imposing, so it'll need an area with enough headroom. The rear panel has a 2.5 Gigabit Ethernet port for a high-speed broadband connection, but only two other Gigabit Ethernet ports for connecting other devices. There's also a USB-C port on the back, which lets you attach a hard drive or other storage device to your network. However, the latter only supports transfer speeds up to the USB 2.0 standard, which is disappointing.

> "Hit 125Mbps on 2.4GHz and 150Mbps on both 5GHz and 6GHz"

You use the Predator Connect app to set everything up and this includes useful features such as the ability to choose whether to merge the 2.4, 5 and 6GHz bands into one network for ease of use or create three separate networks so you can assign devices to the most suitable one. The app also provides useful security features and parental controls without any additional subscription, unlike some rivals such as the Netgear Nighthawk RS100 (£110 from www.snipca.com/55035, reviewed in Issue 712).

In speed tests, it smashed our ageing test router and even outperformed our current favourite, the Asus RT-AXE7800 Wi-Fi 6E router (£180 from www.snipca.com/52957, reviewed in Issue 665). Our broadband connection is 150Mbps, but our test router typically manages around 80Mbps on the 2.4GHz band, even when connected devices are in the same room. The 5GHz band is slightly better, but still only achieves about 120Mbps. And both bands struggle to reach the rear of our test house.

The T7, in contrast, takes all this in its stride. On the 2.4GHz band it hit 125Mbps across the whole house, while the 5GHz and 6GHz bands breezed along at the maximum speed of 150Mbps.

Admittedly, the T7's top speed of 11Gbps will be massive overkill for many homes, but if you're a keen gamer or you often work with large file sizes, then the Predator T7 is ideal. However, it fails to topple our favourite router because of the trade-offs it makes on Ethernet and USB ports.

SPECIFICATIONS
Tri-band 2.4GHz/5GHz/6GHz Wi-Fi 7 • 1x 2.5 Gigabit WAN port • 2x Gigabit Ethernet ports • 1x USB-C port • 212x109x109mm (HxWxD) • 900g • Two-year warranty www.snipca.com/55194

VERDICT A reasonably priced tri-band Wi-Fi 7 router that maximises broadband speeds across your whole home

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Asus RT-AXE7800 Wi-Fi 6E router £180 This Wi-Fi 6E router isn't as fast but it's a better all-rounder for those that make use of Ethernet and USB ports

CHOOSE THE RIGHT SPECS

Power banks

What are they?

Power banks (such as the Anker Laptop Power Bank, pictured, £90 from www.snipca.com/54067, reviewed in Issue 706) are portable rechargeable batteries you can plug into mobile devices to top up their charge. They come in all shapes, sizes and capacities. Small lightweight banks might only be capable of charging smartphones, for example, while bulkier, heavier units have enough power to recharge a laptop.

How do they work?

They are essentially a rechargeable battery within a plastic case. They have at least one port for connecting to the mains to charge up the power bank's own battery. Then, when you're out and about, this (or any other ports on the bank) can be used to charge any devices you have with you.

What are the specs?

The two key specs to watch out for are capacity and power output. The capacity is how much charge the power bank can hold, and is quoted in milliamp hours (mAh). The higher the number, the more it can store. Phone batteries are typically around 5,000mAh, so a 10,000mAh power bank should hold enough to fully charge it twice over. Power output is quoted in watts (W), and tells you which kind of device can be charged. Laptops can't be charged by anything under 65W. Phones and tablets can be charged with lower-powered banks, but the lower the power, the longer it will take to charge.

Can I change it later?

No. You need to buy the right power bank for the devices you intend to charge. If you need greater capacity or power output at a later date, you'll have to buy a larger power bank.

SMARTPHONE | **£400** from Amazon www.snipca.com/55180

Honor 400

Leading Lite

In Issue 711 we took a look at the Honor 400 Lite (£255 from www.snipca.com/54874), a budget phone from the Chinese manufacturer whose design was clearly inspired by the iPhone 16. It's certainly good value, but left us wanting more from its performance level and photo quality. So the big question is: for an extra £150, does the Honor 400 fix those weak spots? The short answer is yes.

This is partially down to its Qualcomm Snapdragon 7 Gen 3 processor, which definitely isn't cutting edge, having previously appeared in the Honor 200 (reviewed back in Issue 690 – this cost £500 when it came out, but now sells for £280 from www.snipca.com/51369). However, it generates more power than the Lite's own chip, and we didn't experience any lags or glitches during testing, even when playing some fairly demanding games.

> "Vibrant screen, muscular performance and a great camera"

The downside to its muscular performance is that it drains its battery faster. In our tests, it just about stretched beyond a full day of use, but didn't have enough to make it through a second day, which the Lite can manage easily.

The highlight of the 400 is its 6.55in AMOLED screen, which can reach a peak brightness of 5,000cd/m², making it ideal for use outdoors. The colours are vibrant and its crisp 2736x1264-pixel resolution makes watching movies and TV shows a pleasure. It's easily the best screen we've seen at this price. Note, however, that it's slightly smaller than the Lite's screen, but this does mean the whole thing fits more easily into your pocket.

The new 200-megapixel main camera captures some great shots, especially when the sun is out. It particularly excelled at portraits in brightly lit conditions, but also fared reasonably well in low light as evening drew in, where the Lite floundered badly.

Honor has installed MagicOS 9.0 on this phone, which tends to make Android feel more like Apple's iOS. It loses some of Android's slickness as a result, and comes with a lot of additional software installed that you're unlikely to want.

Overall, the Honor 400 is a strong contender, but we still prefer our current favourite Android phone, the Samsung Galaxy A56 (£499 from www.snipca.com/54585, reviewed in Issue 709).

SPECIFICATIONS

Eight-core Qualcomm Snapdragon 7 Gen 3 processor • 8GB RAM • 256 or 512GB storage • 6.55in 120Hz 2,736x1,264-pixel AMOLED screen • 200-megapixel rear camera • 12-megapixel ultrawide camera • 50-megapixel front-facing camera • Wi-Fi 6 • Bluetooth 5.4 • Android 15 with MagicOS 9 • 157x75x7.3mm (HxWxD) • 184g • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/55180

VERDICT An impressive offering with an eye-catching screen and strong performance, only slightly marred by Honor's excessive bloatware

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE

Samsung Galaxy A56 £499 More expensive, but our current favourite Android phone is a better all-rounder

WHAT SHOULD I BUY? We solve your buying dilemmas

Which printer can replace my old Canon Pixma?

Q Can you recommend a replacement for my trusty Canon Pixma MG6350 printer? I'm looking to produce high-quality photo prints at 4x6in and 5x7in sizes, as well as crisp double-sided A4 documents. I'll be running it from a Windows 10 PC and would like to connect to it using a USB cable. Speed is not so important, but it should fit into a space that's 50x40cm (WxD) and cost £200 or less.

Gerd Gerhard

A We'd recommend sticking with Canon and buying the Pixma TS8750 (£120 from www.snipca.com/55183, reviewed in Issue 678, pictured). It's a six-colour inkjet model, so isn't as cheap to run as an ink-tank printer, but we found the quality to be exceptional given the price. Those extra ink cartridges really help when printing photos, and its text quality is also excellent. And unlike most printers at this price, it can print on both sides of a sheet automatically.

The TS8750 has been around for a while so it has Windows 10 drivers available from Canon's website, and its small footprint (37x35cm – WxD) will fit into your space.

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KEYBOARD & MOUSE | **£54** from Amazon www.snipca.com/55169

ProtoArc XKM01 Foldable Keyboard and Mouse

Return to the fold

Connecting a Bluetooth keyboard and mouse to a tablet or phone can turn your mobile device into a mini laptop. Alternatively, if you already have a laptop with a substandard trackpad or keys that don't suit your typing style, a keyboard and mouse can free you up to work in more comfort.

The ProtoArc XKM01 is a handy kit comprising a folding keyboard, a mouse and a tablet/phone stand. All three pack away into a travel case measuring just 40x309x144mm (HxWxD), so are very easy to transport. The keyboard's two flanks fold in to meet in the middle, halving its size to a very compact 20x215x119mm. The mouse is also slight at 23x108x57mm, but manages to squeeze in key features such as a scroll wheel.

Both keyboard and mouse feel sturdy despite their lightweight designs. We got them up and running straight away, by simply pairing them via the Bluetooth settings in our laptop and tablet. You can pair both keyboard and mouse simultaneously, or just use one or the other, as and when you need them.

The keyboard is comfortable to type on. Impressively, it also has a full number pad, which is a particularly useful add-on for a smaller laptop that doesn't have room for one of its own. The mouse is basic but also comfortable to use, with good tracking and a smooth exterior that sits nicely in the hand.

SPECIFICATIONS

105-key keyboard • Easily switch between three devices • Rechargeable batteries • Bluetooth and wireless USB connections available • 40x309x144mm (HxWxD, in case) • 860g • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/55169

VERDICT An affordable and portable kit that brings the benefits of a physical keyboard and mouse to your travelling devices without taking up much room

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Logitech Keys-To-Go 2 £80 More expensive, larger and lacking the mouse, but it's a sturdier option

POWER BANK | **£50** from Amazon www.snipca.com/55170

Anker 20,000mAh 87W Power

Bring charges

Anker's neat Power Bank has a generous capacity, provides plenty of power, and comes with a handy built-in USB-C cable so you never have to hunt for one before heading out. It also has two ports beside this – one USB-C, one USB-A. The two USB-C connections can hook up to a power adapter to charge the power bank itself or to pass its charge on to other devices. The USB-A port is for outbound charging only.

While it can deliver 87W across all its ports, it can only supply 65W maximum from one of its USB-C options. That should be enough to charge most modern USB-C-equipped laptops and still leave 22W in reserve for charging or supplying power to other devices from its remaining ports.

In our tests it fully charged a Google Pixel 7a phone with a 4,385mAh battery in about two hours, which is a very respectable result. In the process, it lost 30 per cent of its own charge, which means you should be able to get at least three full phone charges out of it.

That's not quite on a par with the INIU P51L-E1 power bank (£30 from www.snipca.com/54995, reviewed in Issue 712) which charged the same device in 90 minutes and depleted by just 27 per cent. However, the INIU's power output maxes out at 22.5W, so can't charge a laptop.

The Anker's build quality is excellent and the integrated USB-C cable feels like it's firmly attached to the device – Anker states that it could handle up to 5kg of attached weight. The screen only shows the available charge percentage, but this is clear to see at a glance and it's really the only information you need from this kind of charging device.

SPECIFICATIONS

87W total power output • 20,000mAh • 1x USB-C cable • 1x USB-C port • 1x USB-A port • 157x74x25mm (HxWxD) • 439g • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/55170

VERDICT A convenient and sturdy power bank with enough power to keep a laptop running or charge a smartphone three times over

★★★★½

ALTERNATIVE INIU P51L-E1 £30 A cheaper option that's smaller and better suited to lower powered devices, such as smartphones

BIRD FEEDER/CAMERA | **£113** from PeckPerk www.snipca.com/55231

PeckPerk Smart Bird Feeder

Video feed

The PeckPerk Smart Bird Feeder lets you feed the birds in your garden and watch them on its video camera. It sends footage to your smartphone, much like a security camera or video doorbell, except that it's capturing wildlife rather than intruders.

The nature-inspired, acorn-like design makes it appealing to birds, though it's made from recycled plastics. Setup is simple and we had it up and running in just a few minutes. The camera arrived pre-charged, so we simply needed to attach it to a tree with the included straps, add some bird seed, download the free PeckPerk smartphone app and connect the camera to our Wi-Fi.

> "Any bird movement triggers the camera to record for 10 seconds"

It comes with a solar panel, which more or less keeps the camera charged, but it can also be topped up via a USB-C port if your location doesn't get enough direct sunlight. It's certainly designed to withstand the harsher aspects of the British weather with an IP65 ingress protection rating.

Footage was sharp and we were very impressed by the quality of the 2K resolution and the wide 165-degree field of view.

Movement around the feeder triggers the camera to start recording for 10 seconds and you can adjust the detector's sensitivity within the app. The app also lets you view all events from the day and up to seven days previously. You can save any video captures to your phone or the in-app album. The best part is that all this is accessible without a subscription.

To use its AI tools to identify bird species, you can take out a two-year subscription when you buy for £45. We tried it, but didn't think it was worth it as you're unlikely to get hard-to-identify species in your feeder and we found it inaccurate anyway.

The PeckPerk is more affordable than the Birdfy Feeder 2 Duo (£320 from www.snipca.com/55230, reviewed in Issue 701), though it only comes with a single camera, while the Duo provides an extra viewing angle from its second camera. The resolution of the PeckPerk is higher than the 1080p cameras in the Duo and footage is sharp and clear. If you're on a tight budget and have a spare security camera available, it's worth seeing if it will fit in the Wasserstein Bird Feeder Camera Case (£66 from www.snipca.com/46929, reviewed in Issue 664).

SPECIFICATIONS

2K video resolution • Rechargeable battery (via solar panel or USB-C port) • 165-degree field of view • Requires 2.4GHz Wi-Fi • 1.8L seed capacity • 253x160x192mm (HxWxD) • 660g • Two-year warranty www.snipca.com/55231

VERDICT A neat bird feeder-camera combination that captures clear footage without a subscription

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Birdfy Feeder 2 Duo £320 Much more expensive but has two cameras to view birds from different angles

DO I REALLY NEED...

AI smart lighting?

What is it?

Philips (www.philips-hue.com) has announced a free update to its Hue app that brings AI to your home lighting. It's coming to the UK in July.

What does it do?

It lets you set colour and brightness using your voice and natural language. Suggest a mood, occasion or desired ambience, and the app (pictured) will set your lights accordingly. The app will try to use its existing mood-lighting options to provide your desired effect, or create something new if it doesn't find a match.

What's the catch?

There isn't one. The update is free and, as long as you already have Philips Hue lights, you can choose whether to use the new AI system or stick to tapping controls on the app.

So can I do without it?

Yes, but it sounds like it might be fun to play with.

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OnePlus Pad 3
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Our pick of products that have won the Buy It award

LAPTOP

Dell Inspiron 14 Plus
£899 from www.snipca.com/55245
Tested Issue 683

This is back as our favourite as its replacement, Asus's Vivobook 16 Flip, seems to have sold out. It remains an excellent laptop, with a fast processor, 16GB RAM, 512GB SSD and a 14in 2240x1400-pixel screen. Also recently discounted to £749.

ALTERNATIVE PCSpecialist 16 Fusion British-made laptop with superb screen and built for advanced AI tasks. £981 from www.snipca.com/55094

DESKTOP PC

Palicomp AMD Cobra
£400 from www.snipca.com/43515
Tested Issue 643

This fast PC is a mouth-watering bargain, with 16GB of RAM, a 2TB SSD and a six-core processor – though it lacks USB-C ports and built-in Wi-Fi.

ALTERNATIVE Wired2Fire Ultima WS Home Office Workstation Blisteringly fast PC, powered by an overclocked eight-core processor and 1TB SSD. £675 from www.snipca.com/41500

APPLE iPAD

Apple iPad 11
£329 from www.snipca.com/54887
Tested Issue 711

With a faster processor and increased storage (from 64GB to 128GB), the 2025 edition of the iPad is simply stunning. Battery life is over 11 hours, which is better than any other iPad, including more expensive models.

ALTERNATIVE iPad mini 7 The 2024 version of the mini improves the colour accuracy on the 8.3in screen and has a more powerful processor. £499 from www.snipca.com/52573

ANDROID TABLET

Honor MagicPad2
£400 from www.snipca.com/53150
Tested Issue 700

With a larger screen (12.3in) than the Galaxy Tab S9 (below) and a similar performance for less money, Honor's MagicPad2 is a superb new tablet. The OLED screen has a strikingly sharp resolution, and yet battery life is a mighty 18 hours.

ALTERNATIVE Samsung Galaxy Tab S9 Has a much brighter screen than its predecessor, making it ideal for watching TV. Also has a faster processor, speeding up tasks. £799 (128GB) from www.snipca.com/50039

APPLE iPHONE

Apple iPhone 16
£799 from www.snipca.com/53981
Tested Issue 695

This is the best new iPhone for years, boosted by a processor that's as fast as much more expensive models. The screen is excellent, while the new Camera Control button gives lots of ways to take photos.

ALTERNATIVE iPhone 14 Now heavily discounted, this remains a speedy phone with great features and an impressive camera. £499 (128GB) from www.snipca.com/53982

ANDROID PHONE

Samsung Galaxy A56
£499 from www.snipca.com/54585
Tested Issue 709

The successor to Samsung's mid-range A55, this has a stunning screen and lasted over 29 hours in our tests. It's faster than Google's Pixel 7a in all tasks, and has AI-powered photo tools.

ALTERNATIVE Google Pixel 7a Cheaper version of Google's flagship phone, it uses AI to improve photos and lasts 10 hours. Has fast processor and 8GB RAM. £279 from www.snipca.com/55250

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Our pick of products that have won the Buy It award

MINI PC

GMKtec NucBox K11
£700 from www.snipca.com/54341
Tested Issue 707

A fast and powerful machine, but what really sets it apart are the ports letting you upgrade it – such as the OCuLink connection for graphics cards. Also has six USB ports, 32GB RAM (upgradeable to 96GB) and a 1TB SSD.

ALTERNATIVE Geekom A8 Too small to accommodate many ports, but makes up for it with a 2TB SSD and SD card slot for adding storage. £719 from www.snipca.com/51157

EBOOK READER

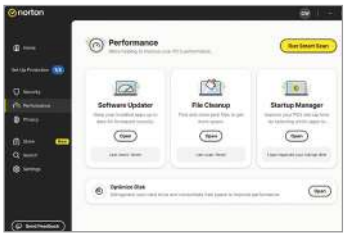
Amazon Kindle Paperwhite
£160 from www.snipca.com/52730
Tested Issue 698

The sixth version of the Paperwhite has a larger screen (7in), faster page turns and longer battery life (12 weeks – up from 10). Its glare-free finish means you can easily read it in bright sunlight, and its 300ppi resolution makes text a joy to read.

ALTERNATIVE Kobo Libra Kobo's first colour e-reader, with over 4,000 tones to make illustrations and photos leap out. £210 from www.snipca.com/50192

SECURITY SOFTWARE

Norton 360 Deluxe 2025
£14.99 from www.snipca.com/54797
Tested Issue 629



Norton has always performed strongly in our antivirus tests, regularly making the top three. Owned by US firm Gen Digital, it's available at a discount on our Software Store. Use the link above for a three-device, two-year licence at a special discount price. Other versions are available.

ALTERNATIVE Bitdefender Total Security Another top performer that we're offering at a discount. £24.99 from www.snipca.com/41141

WEBCAM

Obsbot Meet SE
£79 from www.snipca.com/54725
Tested Issue 710

The Meet SE from Chinese firm Obsbot beats the picture quality of our previous favourite, Logitech's C925e. Colours are vibrant and accurate, with terrific detail even in poor lighting thanks to a relatively wide aperture.

ALTERNATIVE Creative Live Cam Sync 4K Affordable 4K webcam with high-quality video that can also capture voice from a distance. £45 from www.snipca.com/51577

PC MONITOR

Philips 27E1N1600AE
£202 from www.snipca.com/54190
Tested Issue 692

An affordable 27in monitor with a sharp resolution, impressive image quality and a sturdy build. It has an HDMI port, a USB-C port and two USB 3.0. The hefty base means you can raise and tilt the monitor easily using just one hand.

ALTERNATIVE Asus ROG Strix XG27ACS Another excellent 27in monitor with 1440p resolution and a fast refresh rate aimed at gamers. £229 from www.snipca.com/49898

SOLID-STATE DRIVE

Corsair MP600 Pro LPX 1TB
£80 from www.snipca.com/52658
Tested Issue 630

In our tests, this M.2 SSD hit speeds of 7,364MB/s and 6,870MB/s when reading and writing data – astonishingly fast scores. It's compatible with the new PCIe 4.0 standard, which is twice as fast as PCIe 3.0. The 1TB model costs £80; 2TB costs £139.

ALTERNATIVE Crucial MX500 500GB As fast as an SSD can get in the traditional 2.5in SATA format, this is a great-value upgrade. £55 from www.snipca.com/53808

COMPETITION

Win 1 of 3...
Majority Folio Bluetooth Turntables

Perfect for both vinyl enthusiasts and those new to the format, the Majority Folio Bluetooth Turntable combines classic sound with modern features. This elegant record player offers USB recording and playback, making it easy to convert your cherished vinyl collection into digital files.

Featuring an Audio Technica AT3600L cartridge, the turntable delivers clear, detailed sound, while its auto-stop function protects your vinyl and stylus by automatically stopping playback at the end of a record. Its sleek, book-like design makes it a sophisticated addition to any space, while the portable format allows you to take your music with you.

It comes with a 45RPM adapter, high-quality slip mat to reduce vibrations, and a detailed user manual to get you spinning straight out of the box.

To enter this competition, answer the question at www.snipca.com/55095 and submit your details by midnight Tuesday 15 July. Good luck!

You can buy **Majority's Folio Bluetooth Turntable** for £155 from www.snipca.com/55096. For more Majority products, including DVD players, soundbars, speakers and turntables, visit www.majority.co.uk and 'like' www.facebook.com/MajorityAudio.

PRINTER

HP OfficeJet Pro 9135e
£217 from www.snipca.com/53101
Tested Issue 700

A versatile cartridge printer-scanner for the home office that makes printing jobs quicker and easier than most of its inkjet rivals. Colour prints cost a reasonable 6p per page, while mono costs 2p. Printed text is superb and photos are pretty good too.

ALTERNATIVE Epson EcoTank ET-1810
Not the fastest printer, but comes with enough ink for 4,500 mono and 7,500 colour pages. £150 from www.snipca.com/52191

SMART TV

Bush 43UT24SB
£180 from www.snipca.com/53637
Tested Issue 703

It's rare to find a 43in TV this cheap, especially with a superbly bright screen. Sound isn't bad either, and it offers most of the streaming services, including Freely. Its TiVo operating system is very easy to use.

ALTERNATIVE Samsung CU8000
More expensive, but has a 55in LED screen and sharp 4K resolution. Connectivity is good, with three HDMI and two USB ports. £419 from www.snipca.com/52110

ROUTER

Asus RT-AXE7800
£180 from www.snipca.com/52957
Tested Issue 665

This router has Wi-Fi 6E, so will be capable of the fastest possible speeds on the 6GHz network over the next few years. It has five Ethernet ports and also a USB 3.0 port to connect a hard drive or NAS drive.

ALTERNATIVE Synology WRX560
Our previous favourite remains an excellent choice, delivering speeds of up to 791.5Mbps. Add more units to set up mesh Wi-Fi. £212 from www.snipca.com/52051

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48 In the Club: Track who's opened your emails

HOW TO...

Back up your two-factor authentication codes

by Nik Rawlinson

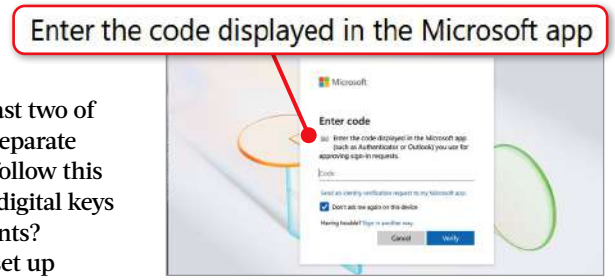
What you need: 30 minutes **Time required:** Google Authenticator, Bitwarden

You'd never have just one key for your house. Common sense dictates you'd get at least two of them cut and keep them in separate places. But how many of us follow this advice when it comes to the digital keys that secure our online accounts?

I'm as bad as anyone. I've set up two-factor authentication (2FA) on 29 online accounts and they're all tied to a single code generator that lives on my phone. If I lose my phone, I might find myself permanently locked out of accounts. Here, I'll work through solutions to avoid this disaster, but first let's examine the difference between two-factor authentication and passwords.

In general, passwords are getting less effective. Sometimes that's because we choose easy-to-guess logins. Occasionally, a hacker gets lucky. And every now and then, a data breach reveals even the most secure credentials. Each scenario puts your data at risk.

Enabling two-factor authentication is one way to significantly reduce that risk. Sometimes abbreviated to 2FA or MFA (for multi-factor authentication), it supplements your password with a series of ever-changing codes. Only if you can enter the correct code at the correct time – as well as your password – will you be granted access.



Logging into OneDrive from an unfamiliar browser triggers a 2FA request

Some services, like online banks, will request the code every time you log in. Others, like an online office suite (such as OneDrive, pictured above) or email account, might only ask the first time you log in from a new browser or device. In the latter instance, you can usually tell the service to 'trust' the browser/device you've just authorised.

2FA codes are often delivered in a text message (SMS), but these can be intercepted. Security experts say it's safer to use a dedicated authenticator app instead. These are associated with the service you want to secure and generate time-sensitive codes on your phone or computer. As long as no one else has access to your phone or computer, these should remain a secret.

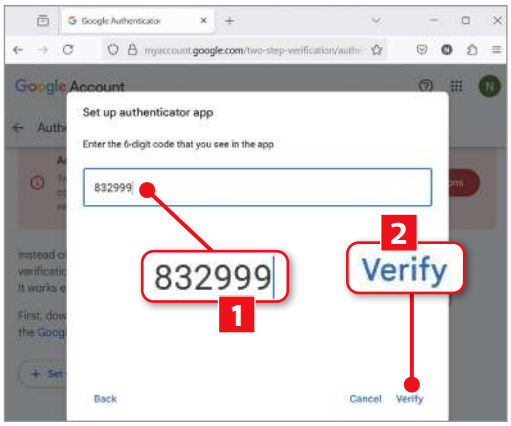
The process for enabling 2FA varies depending on the site or service you're securing and the software you use to generate and manage the codes themselves. We'll use Google Authenticator here, which is widely supported (Android www.snipca.com/55019; iOS www.snipca.com/55020), and free to install and use.

If you're already using an alternative authenticator, download Google Authenticator and follow along. You can enrol multiple devices on 2FA-secured services, and having two or more generating codes simultaneously is a sensible move as it means you'll already have two sets of keys for each service.

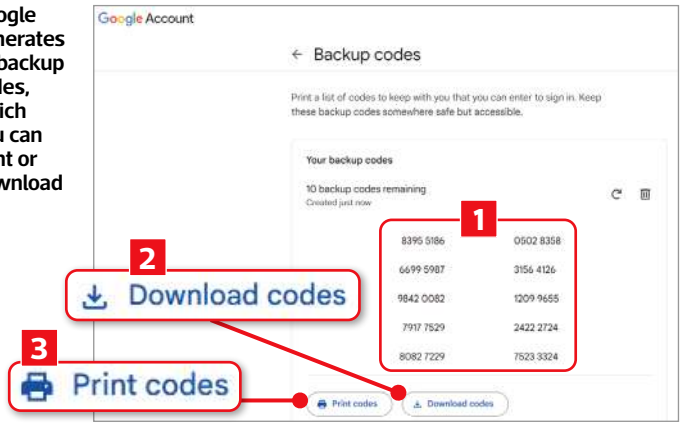
1 Add 2FA to your account

If you haven't already set up 2FA, start with your Google account (if you've already set up a Google account with Google Authenticator, skip this section).

Log in through the browser on your computer, then click your icon in the top-right corner, followed by 'Manage your Google Account'. Click 'Security' in the sidebar, then click '2-Step Verification' in the section 'How you sign in to Google'.



Typing in the code verifies that 2FA has been correctly set up



Google generates 10 backup codes, which you can print or download

Re-enter your Google account password if required, and click Next, then 'Add authenticator app'.

On the following screen, click '+ Set up authenticator', then launch Google Authenticator on your phone and click 'Add a code'. Next, click 'Scan a QR code' and point your phone camera at the QR code shown in your browser. The authenticator app will immediately switch to a new screen that shows the email address associated with your account, plus a six-digit code. This code changes every 30 seconds.

Now click Next in your browser and enter the code shown in the authenticator app (1 in our screenshot above). Click 'Verify' 2 and Google will verify the code to check that the authenticator has been set up correctly.

When you return to the 'Turn on 2-Step Verification' page, click the blue 'Turn on 2-Step Verification' button (see screenshot below). Google will ask you to enter a phone number that can be used to help you sign back in and to which it can send alerts if it spots suspicious activity. If you don't want to do this, click Skip followed by 'Continue anyway'. Click Done and 2-Step Verification (2FA) will be enabled.

2 Set up a second authenticator

If you have a second phone or tablet, repeat the above process to set up Google Authenticator, or an alternative authentication app in the same way. Doing so is like cutting a spare set of keys for your front door: if one phone is lost or stolen, or the battery is flat, you can use the second to authenticate yourself in the usual way.

Although it's possible to install multiple different authentication managers on the same device, doing that defeats the object of setting up 2FA twice, because you'll still be locked out of your accounts if you can't access that device.

3 Download your recovery codes

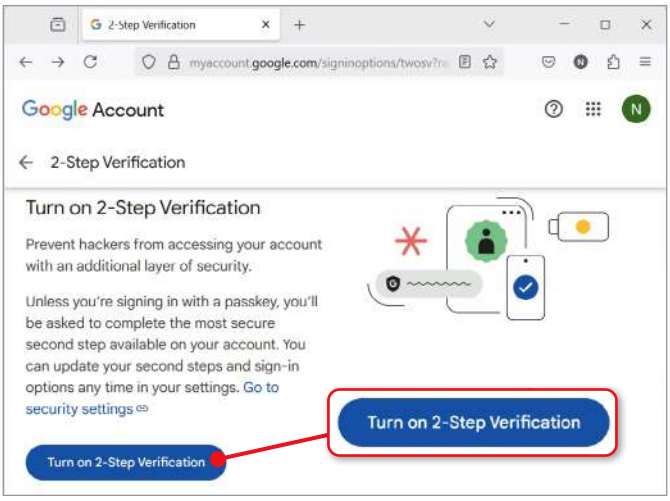
Using an authenticator app that generates codes locally (ie, on your device) means you'll be able to log in even if you don't have network access, which isn't the case if you're relying on text messages. However, if you don't have your phone to hand, you'll be stuck. You should therefore download a set of backup codes for each service you've secured this way. These will sometimes be displayed when you initially set up 2FA, but if they weren't – or you've lost track of them – you can download a new set.

To download the codes for your Google Account, log in, then click your icon in the top-right corner followed by 'Manage your Google Account'. Click 'Security' followed by '2-Step Verification' and enter your password. Now click 'Backup codes' followed by '+ Get backup codes'.

Google will immediately generate 10 codes (1 in our screenshot above). Copy them into a document or click 'Download codes' 2. Repeat this for every other service you've secured using 2FA and save the files in a secure location.

Because the downloaded codes won't ever change, they are like a set of master keys for your account. Whoever finds them can log in as though they were you and, once inside, change your password, disable your code generator, and set up their own code generator or phone to act as the 2FA device on your account. This could prevent you from ever regaining access yourself. It's therefore extremely important that you keep these codes somewhere safe but also accessible.

Printing them is another option 3, as long as you have somewhere to hide them. However, this would put them out of reach if you ever needed to log in when out and about. Ideally, therefore, you need to put them online, in a location that remains secure even without 2FA enabled (because if you've enabled 2FA and lost your authenticator, you're stuck in a loop: unable to get your 2FA codes because they're secured using 2FA). Our advice is to set up a dedicated Bitwarden account, just for your recovery codes – as we'll now explain.


2-Step Verification
Google Account
2-Step Verification
Turn on 2-Step Verification
Prevent hackers from accessing your account with an additional layer of security.
Unless you're signing in with a passkey, you'll be asked to complete the most secure second step available on your account. You can update your second steps and sign-in options any time in your settings. Go to security settings
Turn on 2-Step Verification
Turn on 2-Step Verification

Once you've enabled 2FA, you need to click this blue button to switch it on

4 Save your recovery codes

If you already have a Bitwarden account, don't use it to store your recovery codes. As it contains all your passwords, you shouldn't also put your backup codes there. Anyone who gains access, unlikely though that may be, will have both 'factors' in your two-factor security setup.

But if you don't use Bitwarden, go to www.bitwarden.com and click Get Started Free. Now enter the email address that you want to use to log in (if you already have a Bitwarden account, use a different address here, and don't reuse your existing password).

Once you've logged in, click '+ New' at the top of the screen, then click Note in the dropdown menu that opens. In the 'Item name' box, type a description of what the note contains. Consider using something cryptic without risking confusion in the future. For example, if you secure your Google account with the registration of your first car, and didn't use that password for any other account, you could use 'First car registration' (1 in our screenshot below) or similar as the description – as long as you remember which account that relates to in the future.

When you've entered a description, paste the downloaded codes into the Notes box 2 and click Save. Repeat this process for every other account that you've secured using 2FA.

In future, when you don't have access to either your authenticator or your recovery codes, you'll be able to retrieve the latter and use them to unlock any 2FA-secured service, as long as you're able to log into this dedicated Bitwarden account, which you can do using your browser.

Each recovery code can only be used once, so if you ever do use one, remove it from your saved list. That way you'll know which still work. When you get down to just one or two remaining codes, you'll know that it's time to repeat the steps in the previous section to generate a new set.

How I use 2FA

I use two-factor authentication on every account that supports it. However, as explained here, that's actually left me feeling vulnerable, rather than confident. Having worked out a strategy for retrieving my logins in case of an emergency, I'll be making sure that's no longer the case. With 29 accounts, it's a work in progress, but I'm making it a priority as I don't want to risk being locked out of my accounts.

Nik Rawlinson

How do you use two-factor authentication? Please let us know: letters@computeractive.co.uk

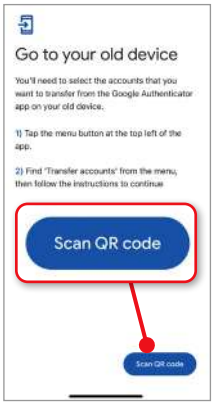
5 Back up your authenticator tokens

Google Authenticator can automatically back up the tokens that it uses to generate your login codes to your Google Account. Check that it's doing so by opening the app on your phone and checking the cloud icon has a tick inside (1 in our screenshot below right). If so, they're being backed up. If not, tap the person icon/photo 2, then either tap an existing Google Account (if one exists in the list) or 'Add another account'. Enter the email address for the account to which you want to save your logins and click Next, then enter your password. Once you're logged in, tap the cloud and when asked 'Start saving codes to this account?', tap Continue.

There are two reasons why we'd recommend backing up your Authenticator configuration. The most obvious is that if you use the same credentials to log into Authenticator on another device, like a new phone, your generated codes will automatically appear on that second device, as well as the first. The second is that you won't need to go through the tedious process of enrolling a new device from scratch if you buy a new phone in the future.

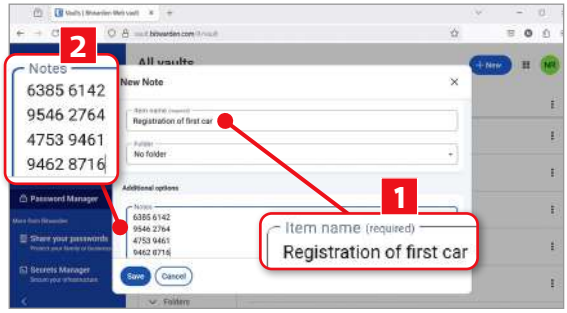
6 Transfer your codes

If you ever change your Google account, don't forget to transfer your codes before logging off from the old one for the last time. Open Google Authenticator on two phones (one logged into each account) then tap the three lines at the top left of each screen. Tap 'Transfer accounts'. Now, on the old phone, tap 'Transfer accounts', then select which logins you want to transfer to the new login. By default, all of your enrolled credentials are selected, so untick any you don't want to transfer. Now tap Next and Authenticator will display a QR code.

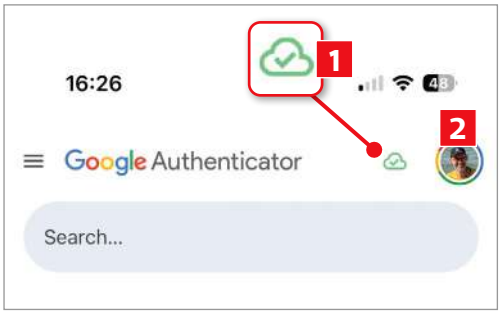


Tap 'Scan QR code' then point your new phone at the code on your old phone

On the new device, tap 'Import codes' followed by 'Scan QR code' (see screenshot right). Point your new phone at the code displayed on your old phone and the 2FA codes will be imported. On the old phone, choose either 'Remove exported codes' or 'Keep exported codes', depending on whether you want to retain them on the old device, then click Done.



Use a cryptic description to help disguise the account to which your codes relate



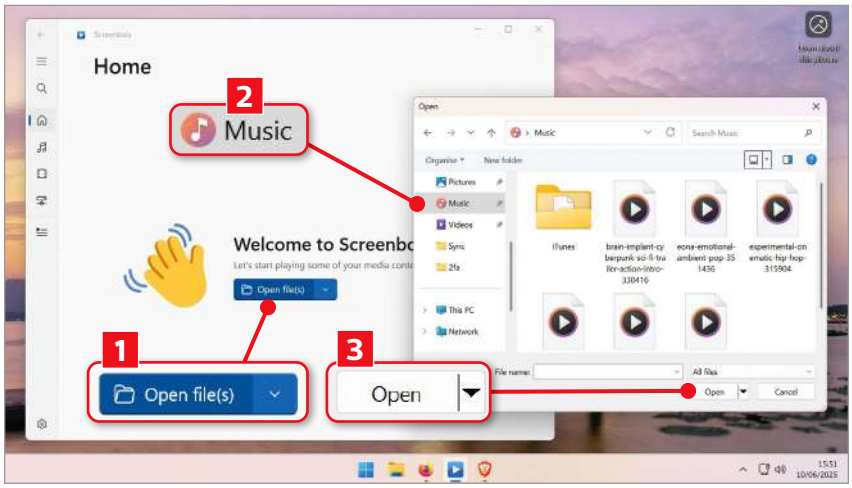
The ticked cloud icon means Authenticator is backing up our 2FA logins online

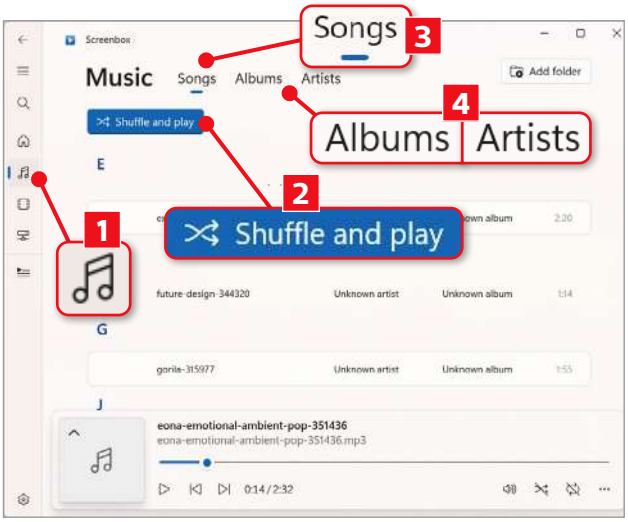
Replace VLC Media Player with Screenbox

What you need: Screenbox Media Player
Time required: An hour

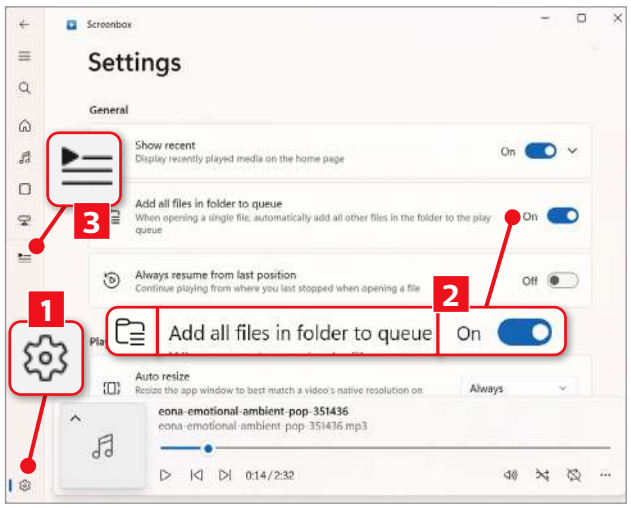
We're big fans of VLC Media Player, but that's made the wait for version 4.0 all the more frustrating. Version 3.0 arrived in 2018, and there's still little sign that a major update is coming. And so we thought it was time to give Screenbox Media Player a try. It's based on much of the same code as VLC but brings a clean, attractive interface that makes it easier to use. It lets you manage and access all your music and video files (whether on your PC or a NAS drive), and has keyboard shortcuts for easier video playback control. Here, we'll show you how to set it up, starting with music.

STEP 1 Download Screenbox Media Player from the Microsoft Store at www.snipca.com/55147. Open it and click 'Open file(s)' 1. Navigate to your music (usually in the Music folder 2 and accessed via your File Explorer sidebar). Select the file you want to play, then click Open 3.

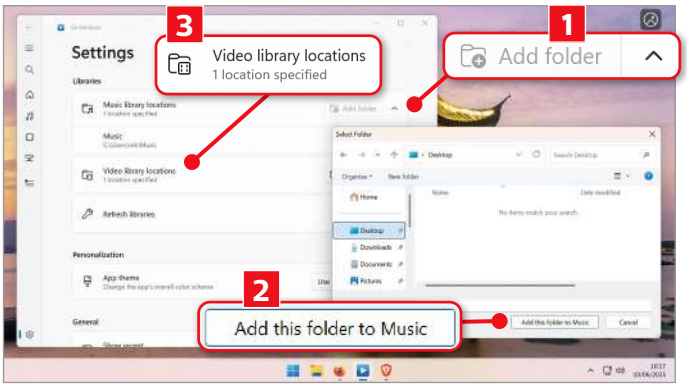




STEP 2 Click the musical-note icon on the left 1 and Screenbox will show the tracks in the folder containing the one you're currently playing. Double-click any of these and they will start playing. Alternatively, click the 'Shuffle and play' button 2 to play the tracks in a random order. Notice the Songs tab has a line below it 3, indicating that all the tracks in the folder are listed individually. Click the Albums or Artists tabs 4 if you're looking for tracks from a specific album or performer.



STEP 3 Although the music view we accessed at the start of Step 2 showed all tracks in the selected folder, they weren't all added to the queue of tracks to play. If you want this to happen by default, click the Cog icon bottom left 1 to open Screenbox's settings, then scroll down and switch on 'Add all files in folder to queue' 2. You can view the list of tracks to be played by clicking the playlist button 3.



STEP 4

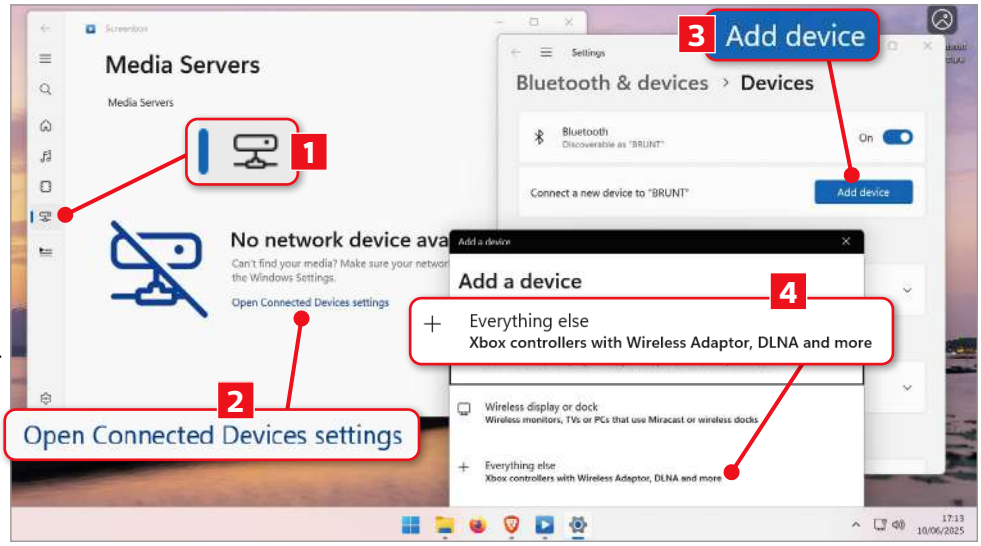
Although it makes sense to keep all of your music in one place, you might have certain tracks that are stored elsewhere – perhaps because they're a particular genre or you use them for work. To add a second music library folder to Screenbox, scroll to the top of the settings screen and click 'Add folder' 1. As before, navigate to the folder you want to add and click 'Add this folder to Music' 2. Add video library folders in the same way using the 'Video library locations' section 3.

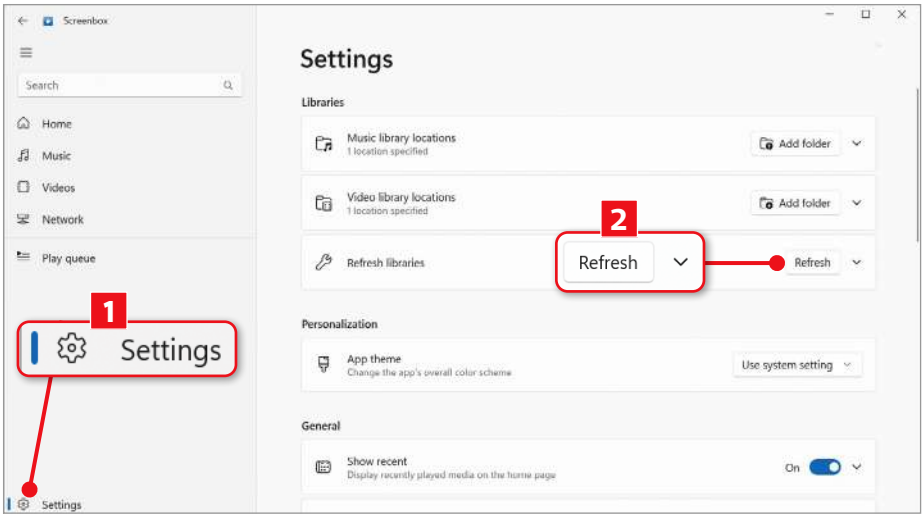
STEP 5

Once you've added a video folder, you can access your movies and other video content by clicking the film-reel icon in the sidebar. Click the 'Picture in picture' button 1 if you're watching while working on something else, and the video window will shrink to the top-right corner of your screen. You can use keyboard shortcuts to control playback: press K to play and pause your video; press J and I to skip backwards and forwards respectively (by 10 seconds).

STEP 6

The Network option 1 lets you play back media stored on a server on your local network. If you have a server but it's not yet set up in Windows, you won't be able to access it, so click 'Open Connected Devices settings' 2 and click 'Add device' 3 in the window that opens. Click 'Everything else' 4 in the following window, and Windows will start searching your network for a connected media server. If it finds one, add it so you can play back its contents via Screenbox.





STEP 7

When we added new media to one of our local libraries it appeared in Screenbox within a a couple of seconds – ready to be played. If, for some reason, this fails to happen on your computer, you can force Screenbox to re-index all of your added folders. Open settings by clicking the Cog icon 1, then click the Refresh button 2 in the Libraries section.

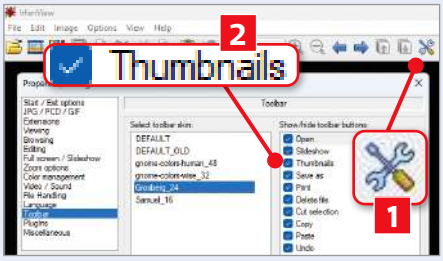
Readers' Tips

TIP OF THE FORTNIGHT

Browse File Explorer images within IrfanView

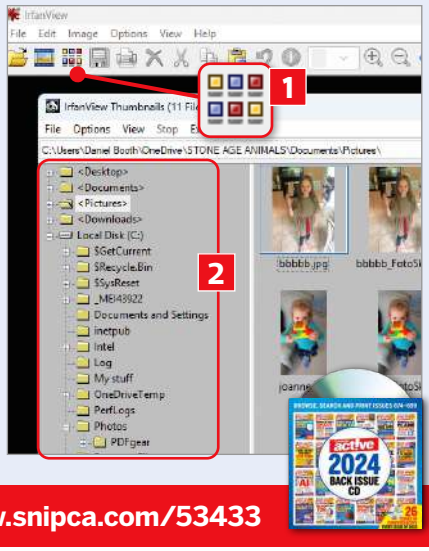
It's good to see the developers of IrfanView (www.snipca.com/54922) are still releasing new versions (Issue 711, page 19). It's amazing that it's still free. One hidden feature I love combines the speed and features of IrfanView with the folder structure of File Explorer in Windows. It's the easiest and most familiar way to browse photos in the program.

Click the Properties/Settings icon at the top (1 in our screenshot above right), followed by Toolbar then tick Thumbnails 2. Click OK to confirm and the Thumbnails icon will be added to



the toolbar (1 in our screenshot right). When you click this you'll see your File Explorer folders displayed in IrfanView 2, letting you batch-rename, convert or resize them within the program.

Eric Clemence



Eric wins a copy of our 2024 Back Issue CD

Buy it from us at www.snipca.com/53433

APPS

Test your internet quality using lightweight Orb

Robert Irvine's 'Easy When You Know How' column in Issue 711 (page 74) on finding internet quality (rather than speed) was very interesting. Whenever I download any apps for my iPhone, I look to see how big they are. Ookla's Speedtest (www.speedtest.net), which Robert mentions at the start of his column, is 156.1MB. But the Orb app (https://orb.net,

pictured below left), which Robert uses to measure the quality of his internet, is just 30.7MB. That's a huge difference. So for that reason I'm now going to use Orb.

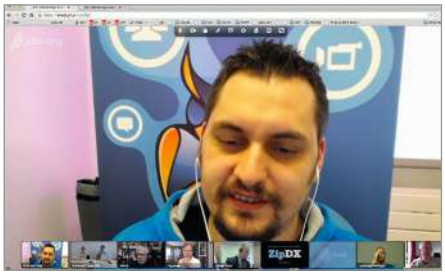
Keith Holman

SOFTWARE

Make free video calls using Jitsi

In recent issues readers have asked what they can use instead of Skype, which Microsoft has now discontinued. You give the usual alternatives of Facebook Messenger and Zoom, but you haven't mentioned Jitsi Meet (www.snipca.com/55097, pictured above right).

For more than the past two years me and my friends in Canada, Australia, the US and UK have all enjoyed hours of



conversation using Jitsi Meet. The program is easy to set up and use, and you can create your own phrase to use as the link you need to click to join the chat. Notably, there's no time lag between the video and the sound. Best of all, it's completely free, with no time restrictions.

Mike Harold

Why I stopped using...

Microsoft 365 Family

With Microsoft axing Publisher in October 2026, I started to wonder whether it would stop offering other Office tools.

And what I use instead...

I saw an offer to buy a one-off licence of Ashampoo Office 9 (www.snipca.com/55054) for just £20 (usual price £90). I was a bit sceptical, so downloaded the free trial just to check compatibility with my PowerPoint, Word and Excel files. Apart from some minor formatting anomalies, it all worked fine.

I can download this on up to five computers, and its Calculate (see screenshot), Write and Present tools replace Microsoft's Excel, Word and PowerPoint respectively. I then cancelled my Microsoft Family 365 subscription, which cost £10.99 a month.

However, it doesn't include a replacement for Publisher, so for that I've installed the excellent (and free) LibreOffice Draw (www.snipca.com/55052). Combined, Ashampoo's tools and Draw let me work

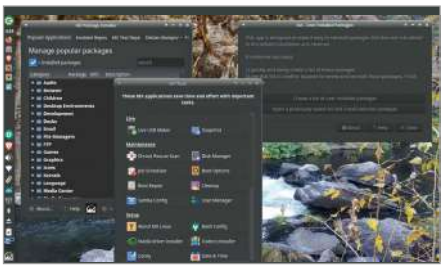
on all of my old Office files.

Richard Malin

Tell us why you stopped using a website, app or program: letters@computeractive.co.uk

Handy hints and tips from your fellow readers

Email us your tips: letters@computeractive.co.uk



OPERATING SYSTEM

Dual-boot MX Linux with Windows 10 when support ends

I was pleased that you addressed the possibility of using Linux to replace Windows 10 when Microsoft ends support in October (Issue 711, page 60). I've been exploring Linux for many years. Initially, this was with Puppy Linux variations (www.snipca.com/55098) using live USB memory sticks (most Puppy distros let you save your changes when you shut down).

But when Microsoft ceased supporting Windows 7 in 2020 I set up a dual-boot system, using Linux and Windows 7 (disconnected from the internet). I've tried Ubuntu (https://ubuntu.com) and Linux Mint (https://linuxmint.com), however a few years ago I discovered MX Linux (https://mxlinux.org) and this has become my favourite Linux system. It's fairly lightweight, and has an excellent members' forum where people are quick to respond to cries for help.

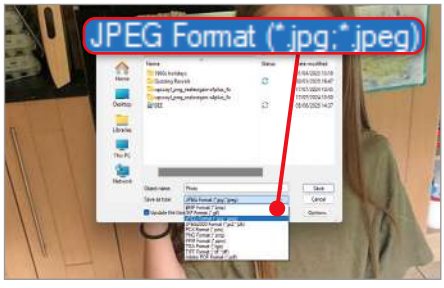
The default desktop is Xfce desktop (www.xfce.org, pictured above), which is what I run. MX Linux works with a wide range of software – including office, media and graphics – that are compatible with similar programs in Windows.

Chris Nother

SOFTWARE

Convert AVIF files using FastStone

In Issue 709's Problems Solved (page 69) Richard Norwood said Microsoft Paint and other apps won't open an AVIF image file he has. Can I suggest he uses the free program FastStone Image Viewer (www.snipca.com/55100)? It opens both AVIF and WebP files (which many other free programs still struggle with) and lets you convert them into common formats like PNG or JPEG (see screenshot below left). I use it regularly.



Morvyn Finch

HOME NETWORK

Keep your old Wi-Fi name and password on a new router

In Issue 710's Problems Solved (page 64) Don Sellick wanted to keep his existing SSID and password when switching to a new router. I faced a similar problem when I switched from Sky to EE – I wasn't just changing my router, but also my broadband provider.

At first, I manually reconnected each device – we don't have too many. But then I installed the EE app (pictured below) on my phone, and one of the options was to enter the previous router's SSID and password. When I did that, the app reset the new router to use those old details.

Because most of our family's devices, including my children's and grandkids', remembered the old settings, everything reconnected automatically. It saved a lot of hassle, and I'd recommend checking if your new router or app offers the same feature.

Robert Aindow

HARDWARE

Transfer DV video data over USB

In Issue 710 (page 67) you advised John Rose to buy a MiniDV camcorder on eBay, then buy a S-Video/RCA analogue capture device that plugs into the laptop's USB socket. He'd then be able to digitise his old MiniDV tapes. This is a good general solution, but it's useful to know that some Panasonic camcorders made around 2006 can transfer the original DV video data over USB as well as FireWire.

Since Windows XP all you need to do is change a setting in the camcorder menu, then plug it into the computer using the supplied USB cable. You can then use any DV capture software. It can be tricky to identify which Panasonic camcorder can do this, however. Try searching for your model online and a PDF manual with the menu setting 'USB FUNCTION>MOTION DV'. My Panasonic NV-GS400 camcorder (pictured above) can do it, as can other models starting with NV-GS. I wrote more instructions at www.snipca.com/55099.

Colin Browell

Reader recommends...

Arteck HW315 cordless keyboard

£48 from www.snipca.com/55059

I recently bought this to replace my ageing Microsoft Natural keyboard. It's a truly excellent piece of kit, with a high build quality. It's available for £48 from Amazon at the link above, though I bought it for under £40 on eBay.

It's lighter and much less unwieldy than the Microsoft keyboard it replaces. It has a similar split design, though the right and left halves are more naturally angled slightly outwards to reduce wrist strain. It has a quiet but positive mechanical keystroke and there's a soft comfortable wrist pad. It's instantly responsive as soon as you plug in the tiny USB dongle, and you recharge it using a USB-C cable.

I've used this 'natural' keyboard design for years and find it very effective at reducing wrist strain. With this new unit I'm typing even faster and with far less hand movement. Highly recommended.

Russell Greene

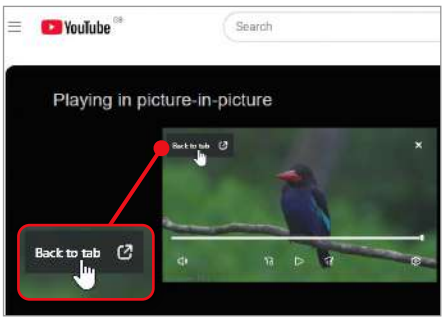
Want to recommend hardware or software to fellow readers?
Email letters@computeractive.co.uk

EDGE

Play videos in an improved picture-in-picture mode

Edge 137 improves the browser picture-in-picture (PiP) mode, which continues playing videos in a small floating window when you switch to another tab or program. To use the mode, either right-click a video twice and choose 'Picture in picture', or click the 'Picture in picture' icon if available.

The updated PiP mode turns the floating window into a mini media player, giving you greater control over what you're watching. You can play and pause the video, rewind or fast-forward by 10 seconds, use the progress bar to jump to a specific moment and mute the volume. Click 'Back to tab' (see screenshot below) to return to the main player.

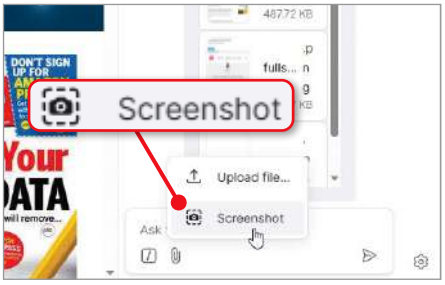


BRAVE

Ask Leo to take screenshots of web pages

Brave has updated its AI assistant, Leo, with the useful ability to capture and analyse screenshots of entire web pages. This differs from the existing 'Summarise this page' option, which studies the main text content to provide you with a brief synopsis.

The Screenshot feature, in contrast, looks at everything on the page so you can ask Leo questions about any aspect of the content. To try it, click the Leo button in Brave's sidebar to launch the chatbot then click the paperclip icon and choose Screenshot (see screenshot below). Leo will capture a series of screenshots, spanning the full page you're viewing, and answer your questions about them.



FIREFOX

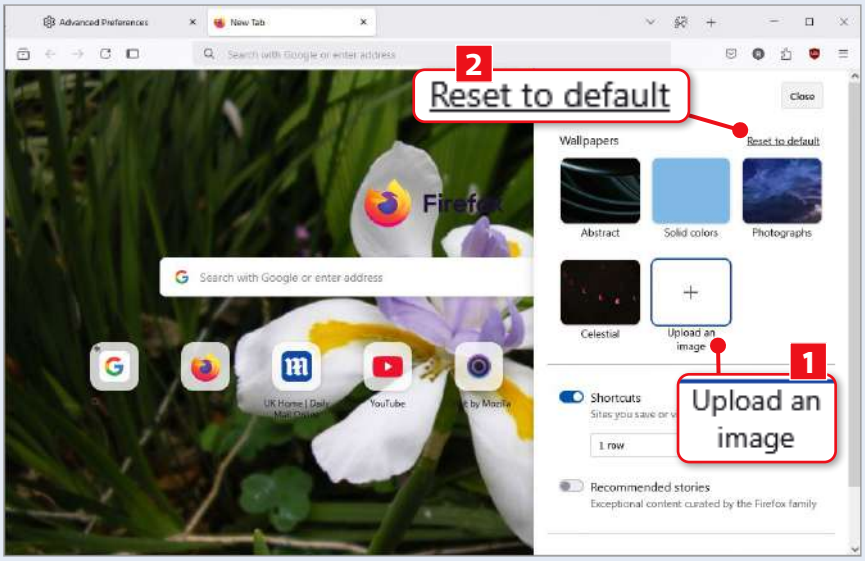
Set your own images as New Tab wallpaper

Firefox 139, released at the end of May, lets you customise your New Tab page by using your own photos as wallpaper. Previously, you were limited to choosing from the browser's own selection of wallpapers.

The feature is being rolled out gradually, but you can check if you have it by clicking the Personalise New Tab cog in the bottom-right corner of the New Tab page. Look for a new 'Upload an image' option in the Wallpapers section (1 in our screenshot).

Click this to choose a photo or other image from your hard drive, then click Open to set it as the New Tab background. To undo the change, click 'Reset to default' 2.

If you don't see the 'Upload an image' option, you can enable it manually. Type about:config in Firefox's address bar, press Enter and click 'Accept the Risk and Continue'. Search for wallpaper, find the preference **browser.newtabpage.activity-stream.newtabWallpapers.customWallpaper.enabled** and double-click it to change its value to 'true'.

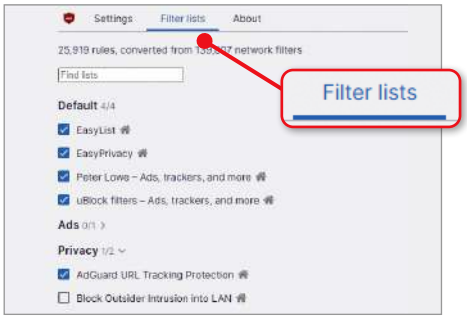


CHROME

Block more trackers and annoyances

Chrome 138, released in June, ends support for Manifest V2 extensions including uBlock Origin. This means you can no longer re-enable the popular content blocker in the browser.

Instead, you should use the Manifest V3-compatible uBlock Origin Lite (www.snipca.com/55101), which blocks most ads on web pages. To boost its protection against trackers and other annoyances – and bring it closer in line with its predecessor – you should enable the extension's additional filters.



To do so, right-click its toolbar button and choose Options, then 'Filter lists' (see screenshot above). Here you activate filters such as AdGuard URL Tracking Protection, which removes tracking elements from URLs, and 'EasyList/uBO – Cookie Notices', which blocks cookie-consent pop-ups

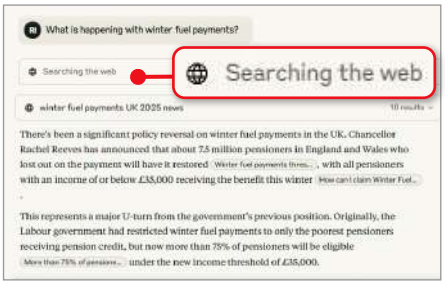
CLAUDE

Search the web for up-to-date information

In our 'ChatGPT vs the rest' feature in Issue 711 (page 56), we predicted that when Anthropic added web-search capabilities to the free version of Claude (www.claude.ai), the AI assistant would produce higher-quality responses. That's now come to pass and all Claude users have access to web search through its new Sonnet 4 language model.

Like ChatGPT, Claude automatically searches the web when it determines a query would "benefit from up-to-date information or specialised knowledge". This means you can ask it about current events, get the weather forecast and search for topics not covered in Claude's training data.

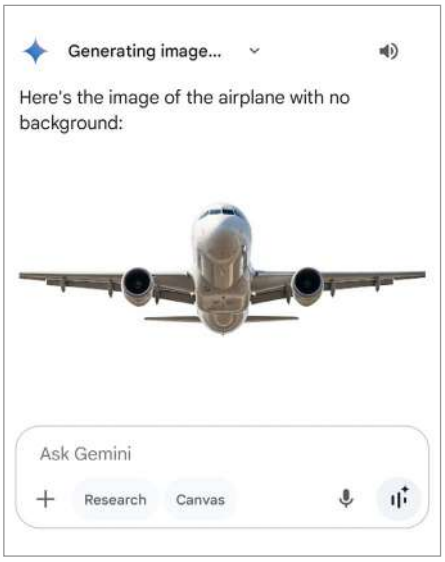
Claude displays a 'Searching the web' message (see screenshot below) when using this mode, and cites the sources of the details it provides.


What is happening with winter fuel payments?
Searching the web
winter fuel payments UK 2025 news
There's been a significant policy reversal on winter fuel payments in the UK. Chancellor Rachel Reeves has announced that about 7.5 million pensioners in England and Wales who lost out on the payment will have it restored, with all pensioners with an income of or below £35,000 receiving the benefit this winter.
This represents a major U-turn from the government's previous position. Originally, the Labour government had restricted winter fuel payments to only the poorest pensioners receiving pension credit, but now more than 75% of pensioners will be eligible under the new income threshold of £35,000.

GEMINI

Edit images using text prompts

As well as generating images from your text prompts, Google Gemini can now edit them too. This means you can modify pictures you create in or upload to the Gemini website or mobile app, then download the result.

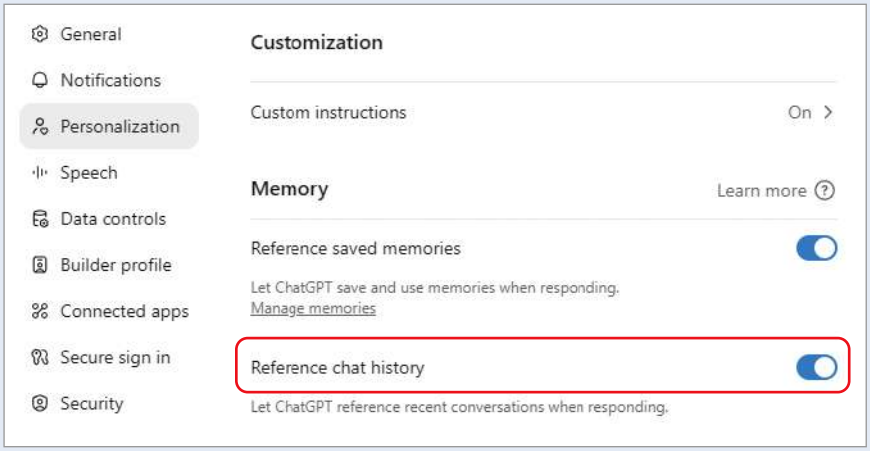


Examples include removing the background from an image (see screenshot below left), adding or deleting elements, adjusting the colours and applying different themes. Because – unlike most chatbots – Gemini doesn't specify a daily limit on image generation, you can keep trying edits until you perfect the picture.

The editing feature is available to all Gemini users with personal accounts (including free ones), but not yet to Google Workspace accounts.

CHATGPT

Store chat details for future reference



OpenAI has upgraded the Memory feature in ChatGPT to remember details of your recent chats. Previously, you could use Memory to improve the relevance of ChatGPT's responses by asking it to store specific details of your interests and tastes, for example 'Remember I use Windows 11 not Window 10'.

The updated Memory feature automatically saves and refers to details of your previous chats, so you don't need to start from scratch when you begin a new conversation. As this may encroach on your privacy, the option is disabled by default in the UK. However, it's worth turning on to get more focused responses from ChatGPT, without needing to explain yourself every time.

To do so, click your profile icon in the top-right corner of the ChatGPT website and choose Settings, then Personalisation. Switch on Memory (if it isn't on already) and enable the option 'Reference chat history' (see screenshot).

See our feature on page 60 for more about protecting your privacy when using AI tools.

DUCK.AI

Upload images for analysis

DuckDuckGo has added an image-upload feature to its AI service Duck.ai (www.duck.ai), which lets you chat anonymously to popular large-learning models (LLMs). This means you can now ask it to analyse images and identify their subjects.

The new option is only available when using the default GPT-4o Mini model in Duck.ai. To upload a picture, either click the 'Attach image' icon in Duck.ai's message box (see screenshot above), or drag the image to the box from a folder on your computer. Enter a query such as 'What is this?' and click the Send button to submit it for analysis.

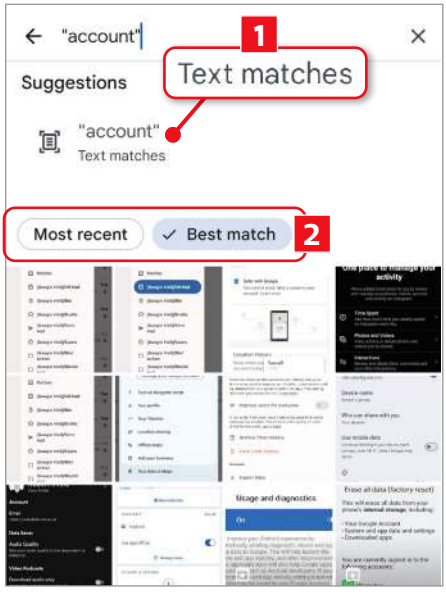
Phone and Tablet Tips

ANDROID & iOS

Find words in images in Google Photos

As part of the celebrations for its 10th birthday, Google Photos has updated its search tool to help you find images containing specific words. Powered by its AI chatbot Gemini, this builds on a feature introduced last year, which lets you search for photos by describing their subject – for example, 'me on the beach'.

The new option focuses solely on the text within images, so is useful for searching screenshots and photos of documents, tickets, receipts, menus, forms of identification and even magazine covers. To use it, Google says to put your search term in quotation marks, for example "boarding pass" or "account" (see www.snipca.com/55104).



You actually don't need to do this, because when you tap the Search tab and type a word or two, you should see a 'Text matches' suggestion with your query already in quotes (1 in our screenshot below left). Tap this to search your Google Photos library for images containing that term – the tool also looks within file names and captions.

If you don't put the search term in quotes, Google Photos will find both image and text matches, which will take longer to sift through. You can sort the results by 'Most recent' or 'Best match' 2.

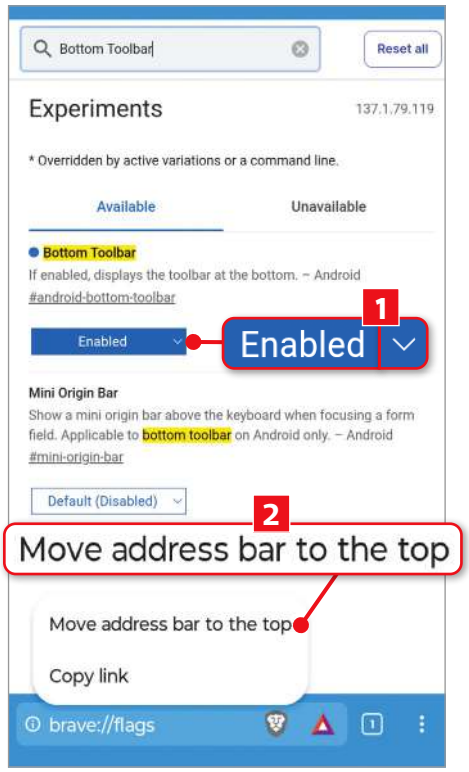
Google Photos also now lets you share albums using a QR code. Tap the Share button in an album and choose 'Show QR code'. This will generate a code other people can scan to view and add photos to the album.

ANDROID

Move Brave or Chrome's address bar to the bottom

Several mobile browsers, including Firefox, Vivaldi and Edge (see Issue 705, page 44), let you move their address bar to the bottom of your screen. This makes it easier to access when you're using your phone one-handed, placing the bar within instant reach of your thumb.

Brave has now added the option, but only in its Android app (www.snipca.com/55115) as an 'experiment'. To try it, type brave://flags in the address bar and press Enter to load the Experiments page.



Search for Bottom Toolbar, tap its dropdown menu and select either 'Enabled default to bottom' or just Enabled (1 in our screenshot above). Relaunch the browser to apply the change.

If you chose Enabled, press the address bar and select 'Move address bar to the bottom'. You can move it back to the top

BEST NEW APPS

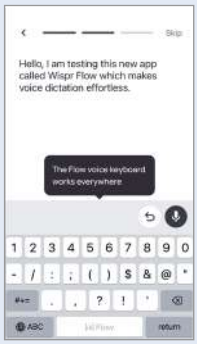
What you should install this fortnight

Wispr Flow

Free*

iOS www.snipca.com/55107

This new speech-to-text app aims to make voice dictation effortless. Wispr Flow lets you dictate into any app, so you can write messages, notes and documents hands-free, and uses AI to ensure correct spelling, punctuation and formatting. Transcribe 2,000 words per week for free, or pay £12 a month for the unlimited Pro plan.


Hello, I am testing this new app called Wispr Flow which makes voice dictation effortless.
The Flow voice keyboard works everywhere

BBC Weather

Free

Android www.snipca.com/55117

iOS www.snipca.com/55118

The redesigned BBC Weather app has a streamlined account settings screen and a new navigation bar with a handy Locations tab. This makes it much easier to access your saved locations and add new ones, to get forecasts for those areas. There's also a Discover tab featuring weather and flood warnings, and a weather map.

Adobe Photoshop (Beta)

Free*

Android www.snipca.com/55106

Adobe's powerful image editor is finally available on supported Android devices, following the release of its iOS version (www.snipca.com/54015) earlier this year. The app's Premium tools are free to use while it's in beta, allowing you to edit, retouch and combine photos like a professional, and access the huge Adobe Stock image library.

*Contains in-app purchases

in the same way 2.

Google is currently rolling out a bottom-address-bar option in Chrome for Android. To check if you have it, tap the three-dot menu button, choose Settings and look for a new Address Bar setting. Tap this and select Bottom to move the address bar down.

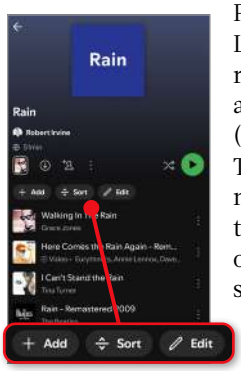
If you don't see the option yet, you can activate it manually. Type chrome://flags in the address bar, press Enter and – as in Brave – enable the Bottom Toolbar experiment.

ANDROID & iOS

Create and edit Spotify playlists more easily

Spotify has updated its app for Android (www.snipca.com/55108) and iOS (www.snipca.com/55109) to make it easier to create and manage playlists. Unlike some of its new features, these are available to free users and Premium subscribers.

When you select a playlist on the Playlists tab of Your Library, you'll see a row of new options above the first song (see screenshot left). Tap 'Add' to search for new tracks to add to the playlist, or use one of Spotify's suggestions.



Tap 'Sort' to sort the playlist by title, artist, album or recently added, and 'Edit' to change the title, rearrange songs and create your own cover artwork. We explained how to do the latter in Issue 707 (page 45).

Another new feature lets you create playlists of a particular musical genre directly from your Liked Songs. Press one of the genre tags at the top of the Liked Songs list – such as Rock, Pop or Mellow – to filter tracks accordingly, then tap 'Make this a playlist'.

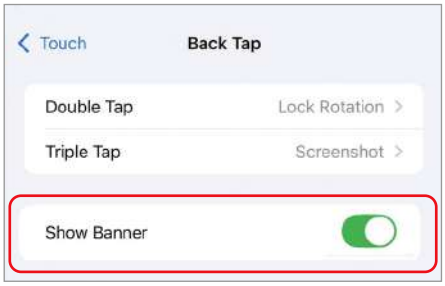
iOS

Get alerts when you trigger Back Tap

Apple released iOS 18.5 in May, with a few minor improvements and new Pride Harmony wallpaper for your Lock screen. The most interesting addition relates to a feature called Back Tap, which was introduced in iOS 14 back in 2020.

Back Tap lets you perform certain actions, such as taking a screenshot, switching on the camera, launching an accessibility feature or locking the screen, by double- or triple-tapping the back of your iPhone (it doesn't work on iPads). The trouble is that it's sometimes hard to tell whether you've tapped your device enough times for it to register. Or you may tap it accidentally and trigger the action without meaning to.

These problems have caused many iPhone users to leave Back Tap disabled, but iOS 18.5 provides a fix. The updated Back Tap displays a banner message telling you the feature has been activated and showing you the number of times you tapped.



To turn Back Tap back on, open Settings and tap Accessibility then Touch. Press 'Back Tap', switch it on then choose the actions you want to assign to double- and triple taps. Ensure the new Show Banner option is enabled (see screenshot above).

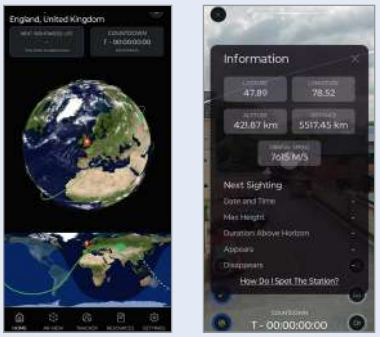
BEST APPS FOR... Tracking things in the sky

Sun Position, Sunrise & Sunset

Free*
Android www.snipca.com/55124
iOS www.snipca.com/55125
This app provides interesting information about the positions and paths of the Sun and Moon, including rising and setting times, and the start of the 'golden hour' beloved of photographers. It uses augmented reality (AR) to show the path of the Sun relative to your current location, and also displays its data visually on an area map.
Best For Tracking the sun

Spot the Station

Free
Android www.snipca.com/55127
iOS www.snipca.com/55136
This official NASA app tracks the position of the International Space Station (ISS). Allow it access to your location, and 'Spot the Station' will start a countdown to the next potential sighting. It shows the station's trajectory on 2D and 3D global maps, uses AR to overlay its path on your current view and provides a live video stream from the ISS.
Best For Tracking the ISS



Flightradar24

Free*
Android www.snipca.com/55130
iOS www.snipca.com/55129
Flightradar24 is still the best app for tracking planes, though some features are limited to its paid-for plans. Thankfully they don't include its brilliant live air-traffic map, and you can unlock free sessions of its amazing 3D view by watching ads. Flightradar24 recently introduced a widget that lets you track popular flights from your home screen.
Best For Tracking flights

*Contains in-app purchases

WINDOWS 10 & 11

Measure your internet speed in PowerToys

You can now measure your internet speed using the Run function in Microsoft's PowerToys. First though you have to install the SpeedTest plug-in. Visit www.snipca.com/55149 then scroll down to the Assets heading and click the 'Download SpeedTest-1.0.2-x64.zip' file (if your computer has a 64bit processor) or 'Download SpeedTest-1.0.2-ARM64.zip' (if your PC has an ARM processor).

After downloading, unzip the file to extract its contents. You now need to copy these into your PowerToys Run Plugins folder. To find this, open File Explorer and type this into the address bar at the top: %LOCALAPPDATA%\Microsoft\PowerToys\PowerToys Run\Plugins. You can also copy and paste it from our Pastebin page: www.snipca.com/55150. But first, make sure you create a subfolder inside the Plugins folder – called SpeedTest or similar. Now copy your unzipped files into it.

Now open PowerToys, then click the System Tools menu on the left followed by 'PowerToys Run'. Now press Alt+Space to open Run (or your own shortcut if you've previously changed it), then type spt (for 'speed test', 1 in our screenshot below) and press Enter. PowerToys will then run a speed test (powered by US software firm Ookla) and show your download, upload and ping speeds 2.

WINDOWS 10 & 11

Close tabs and files in programs with keyboard shortcut

Pressing the shortcut Ctrl+F4 closes the current tab in Notepad, so you don't have to click the X. It also works in browsers you're using in Windows, while in Microsoft Office tools it closes the document, spreadsheet or presentation you're working on (asking you to save first), without closing the program itself.

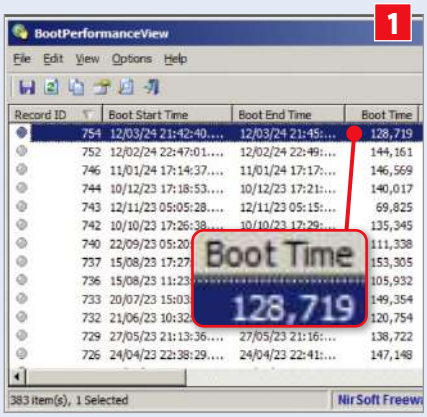
WINDOWS 10 & 11

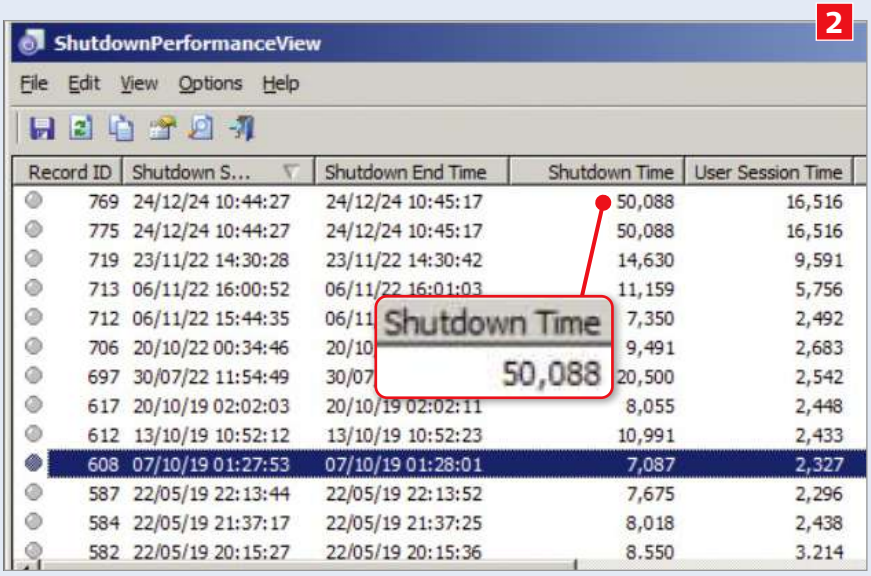
Monitor boot and shut down times

NirSoft, one of our favourite independent developers, has launched two tools measuring how long it takes your computer to boot and shut down.

BootPerformanceView (www.snipca.com/55145) shows the boot start and end times in its first two columns, followed by the time in milliseconds in the third column. To convert milliseconds (ms) to seconds (s), you divide by 1,000, because there are 1,000 milliseconds in one second. So, in screenshot 1 it took the computer 128,719ms to boot, which is 128.7 seconds.

Similarly, ShutdownPerformanceView (www.snipca.com/55146) shows the start and ends times for shutting down your computer, and the overall 'Shutdown Time' in the third column. In screenshot 2 this is 50,088ms, which is just over 50 seconds.

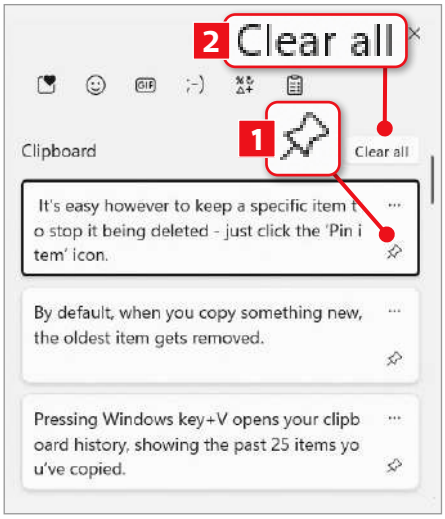




WINDOWS 10 & 11

Pin clipboard items to stop them being deleted

Pressing Windows key+V opens your clipboard history, showing the previous 25 items you've copied. By default, when you copy something new, the oldest item gets removed. It's easy however to keep a specific item to stop it being deleted – just click the 'Pin item' icon (1 in our screenshot right). It will turn black to show it's pinned. Clicking 'Clear all' 2 removes all except pinned items.

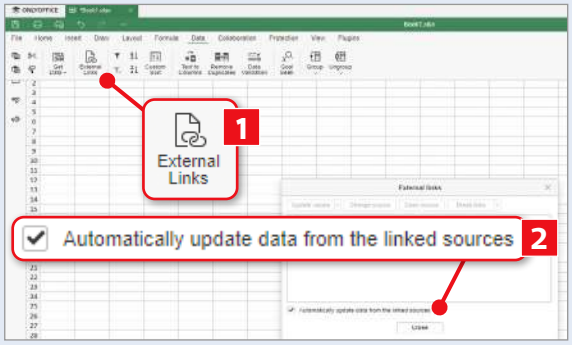

2
Clear all
1
Clipboard
Clear all
It's easy however to keep a specific item t
o stop it being deleted - just click the 'Pin i
tem' icon.
By default, when you copy something new,
the oldest item gets removed.
Pressing Windows key+V opens your clipb
oard history, showing the past 25 items yo
u've copied.

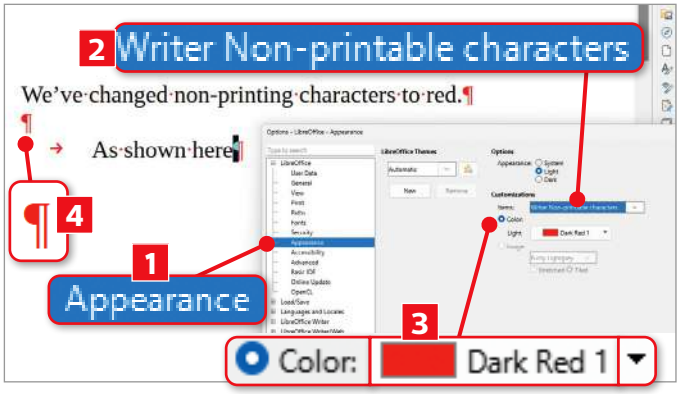
ONLYOFFICE

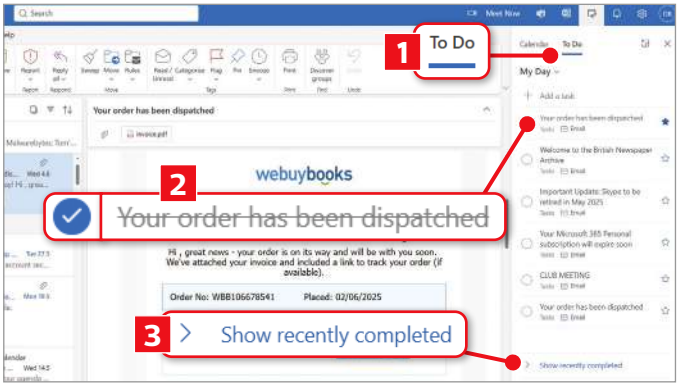
Make spreadsheets automatically update linked data

You can keep a spreadsheet relevant by manually updating the 'linked' data it shows. This is data that's pulled from other sources, such as a budget spreadsheet that gets spending details from separate files for groceries, utilities, entertainment and so on.

Rather than manually updating this data, you can set your spreadsheet to do so automatically – without you having to do anything. OnlyOffice added this option in version 8.3, released in January. Open your spreadsheet, then click the Data tab at the top followed by External Links (1 in our screenshot). Now tick 'Automatically update data from the linked sources' 2, then click Close.







LIBREOFFICE WRITER

Change the colour of non-printing characters

LibreOffice 25.2, released in February, lets you change the colour of non-printing characters in Writer documents. These are formatting characters like a dot to denote a space; pilcrow (¶) to mark a new paragraph; and –› to indicate where you've pressed the Tab key.

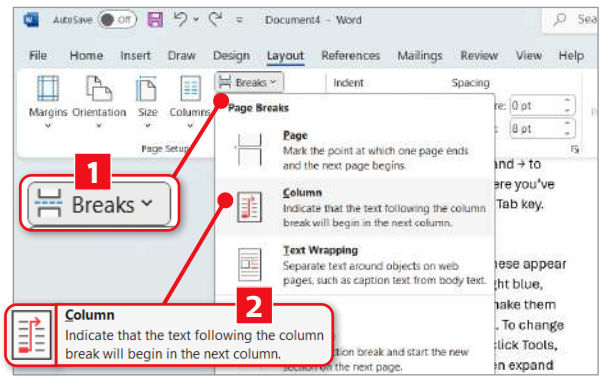
By default these appear as grey or light blue, which can make them hard to spot. To change the colour, click Tools, Options, then expand LibreOffice on the left. Now click Appearance (1 in our screenshot above) and in the Items dropdown menu choose 'Writer Non-printable characters' 2. Now pick a colour in the dropdown menu 3 and click OK at the bottom. We chose 'Dark Red 1', and our characters changed colour accordingly 4.

MICROSOFT WORD

Add column breaks to keep your documents neat

When working with multi-column documents like newsletters, brochures and flyers it's important to control exactly where your text and images flow between columns. You can do this by inserting column breaks. They move everything after the break to the top of the next column. This prevents awkward gaps from ruining the flow, and stops headings and images from being stranded at the bottom of a column.

Place your cursor at the start of the line where you want the break. Now click the Layout tab at the top, then open the Breaks menu (1 in our screenshot below) and select Column 2. If you want to see where breaks are in your document, click the pilcrow (¶) Show/Hide button in the Home tab's Paragraph section.


Document4 - Word
File Home Insert Draw Design Layout References Mailings Review View Help
Breaks
1
Page Breaks
Page
Mark the point at which one page ends and the next page begins.
Column
Indicate that the text following the column break will begin in the next column.
Text Wrapping
Separate text around objects on web pages, such as caption text from body text.
2
Column
Indicate that the text following the column break will begin in the next column.

MICROSOFT OUTLOOK.COM

Drag and drop emails so they become tasks

In Outlook you can turn emails into tasks, which are like digital reminders for actions you need to complete – such as paying a bill or confirming a booking. In the desktop versions of Outlook the fastest way to do this is by dragging the email on to the Tasks icon on the left (this is a tick inside a clipboard).

However, in Outlook.com this icon is placed at the top right and it's called My Day. Click it to open the right-hand panel then select To Do. Now drag and drop an email you want to turn into a task into this panel. You'll see options to add it as an event or a task – choose the latter.

All your tasks will be listed under the To Do heading (1 in our screenshot above). Tick ones you've completed and they'll appear momentarily crossed out 2 before disappearing. There's a link to see recently completed tasks at the bottom 3.

In The Club

Run a club or society? Here's how your tech can make it easier

Track who has opened your emails

When you send an email to multiple club members, it can be useful to see who has opened your message. This can give you a good idea how widely your email has been viewed and who you may need to follow up with – in case some members missed your original message.

Gmail and Outlook.com both support a feature called read receipts, which sends you a notification email when a recipient opens your message. However, you need to have a Google Workspace (paid-for) account to use read receipts in Gmail. Meanwhile, Outlook.com's read receipt feature rarely seems to work as desired.

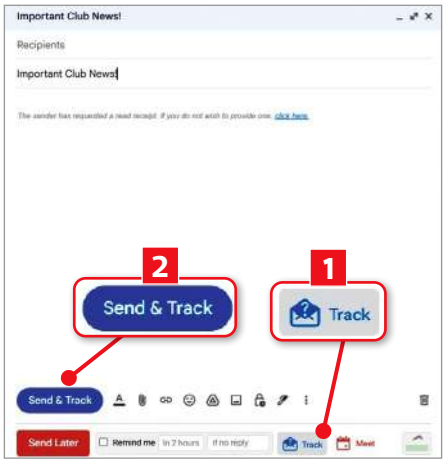
A much better option is to install the Gmail and Outlook.com extension Boomerang, which works in Chrome, Firefox, Safari, Opera and Edge. Boomerang's read-receipt feature for Gmail was recently updated and now offers some powerful abilities for club administrators. If you send an email to multiple members, for example, you can track who has opened it and who hasn't. And if your email contains any links, you can see who has clicked them. You can also opt to receive notifications when any of your recipients open or click an email you sent them.

Read receipt is included among the features in Boomerang's free version, but this limits you to 10 uses of Boomerang's email features every month – if you need more, you'll need to pay (from around £3.75 a month – see www.snipca.com/55135). It's also worth noting that read receipts aren't instantaneous – you may have to wait several minutes until you're notified.

Get read-receipt notifications in Gmail

Visit www.boomeranggmail.com and click the 'Add to Gmail for free' button. On the next screen, click Get to install the extension. Now open Gmail – you'll be prompted to sign into Boomerang with your Gmail details. Do so, then grant Boomerang the permissions it requests.

Before you send a message, click the Boomerang icon in the top-right corner of your Gmail window and select 'Email settings'. In the window that opens, select 'Notify me the first time each recipient opens the email' then click Save.



Once you've written your email, click the Track button followed by 'Send & Track'

Once you're all set up, click Compose and write your email, adding or Cc-ing your recipients as normal. At the bottom of your message, you should see the Boomerang bar (with a red Send Later button on the left). Click the Track button 1 here, followed by 'Send & Track' 2.

Now, if any of your recipients open your email or click a link in it, you'll receive an email letting you know. You can also navigate to the email under Sent and click 'View details' to see a dashboard detailing exactly who has opened or clicked your email and who hasn't.

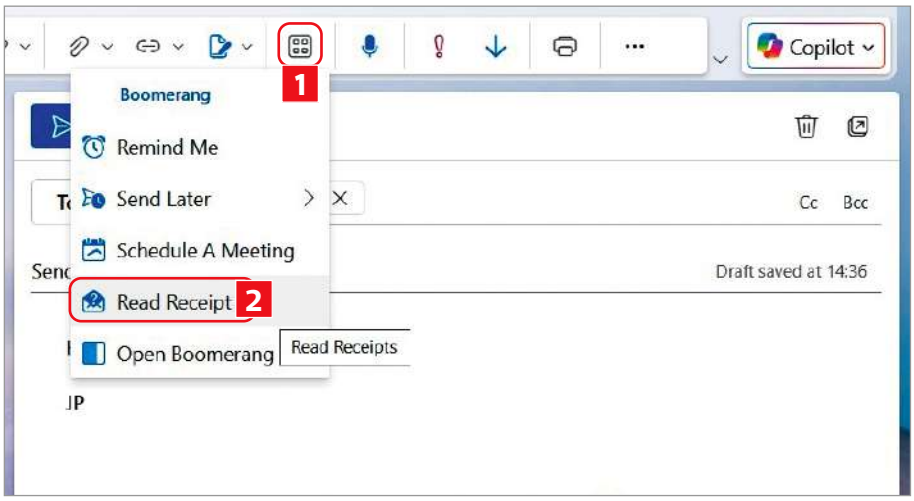
Get read-receipt notifications in Outlook.com

Boomerang works a little differently in Outlook.com. It doesn't currently have all the advanced tracking features offered by the Gmail version, but it still works better than Outlook.com's own read-receipt function.

Go to www.boomerangoutlook.com in your browser and click the 'Add to Outlook for free' button, then click 'Get it now' and follow the on-screen instructions to link it with your Outlook account.

Click 'New email' and compose your message. Before you send it, click the Apps icon (1 in our screenshot below) in the Message toolbar, then click Boomerang. A dropdown menu will appear – select Read Receipt 2, then click Send.

When the first of your recipients opens your message, you'll receive a notification email to alert you. In this message, you'll see a link to your 'Manage Messages page' – click this, then click Tracked Messages to view more details, including how many times your email was opened and whether any links have been clicked.



Click the Apps icon, then Read Receipt in the Boomerang dropdown menu

Next issue: Manage membership fees with Excel's Name Manager

What's All the

Fuss About...

The Gentle Singularity

AI will soon be 'superintelligent', but there's no need to worry (apparently)

What is it?

It's the title of a blog post by Sam Altman (pictured below) in which he describes how AI can become "superintelligent" while remaining safely under human control (www.snipca.com/55178).

Who's Sam Altman again?

He's the US tech entrepreneur who runs OpenAI, the company behind ChatGPT, and probably the most influential voice in AI. What he says is always worth listening to, especially when referring to an event as momentous as the singularity.

Should I already know what that is?

Not really. It's a term for a catastrophic moment when artificial intelligence becomes smarter than humans, not just at one or two things, but across the board. The phrase was coined by US computer scientist Vernor Vinge in the early 1990s: "Within thirty years, we will have the technological means to create superhuman intelligence. Shortly after, the human era will be ended." Vinge was not celebrating this – he meant it as a warning.

Is Altman more optimistic?

So it seems. He reckons we can build superintelligent AI that works for everyone, but only if we control it and get the timing right – this is what keeps it 'gentle'. Most debate about AI swings between extremes predicting it will magically fix all our problems or

OpenAI's Sam Altman thinks AI won't wipe out humanity – let's hope he's right...

ruthlessly wipe us out. Altman's Gentle Singularity sits in the middle. It acknowledges AI's "enormous" potential to improve the world, but admits there will be problems to overcome – not least that "whole classes of jobs" will cease to exist.

But, as boss of OpenAI, surely he's biased?

Well, his views on AI are always likely to be more positive than not, and he never misses an opportunity to push ChatGPT's role in the revolution. He says the chatbot "is already more powerful than any human who has ever lived". But he also warns about the risk of unrestrained AI. His optimism is cautious, not reckless.

So when will this Gentle Singularity happen?

Some time in the 2030s, Altman says. He thinks by 2035 we might have progressed from "solving high-energy physics one year to beginning space colonization the next", and build upon a "major materials science breakthrough" to develop "true high-bandwidth brain-computer interfaces". He predicts that many people will figure out how to benefit from these leaps forward. And happily, AI won't stop you swimming in lakes.

Eh? Why is that important?

It's one of life's pleasures that AI won't eliminate, Altman says, along with loving your family, expressing your creativity and playing games. We think Altman was trying to sound reassuring, but he comes across like a doctor who casually dismisses a serious diagnosis you'd not even considered. Worried? We are now!

Is Altman's analysis widely accepted?

Not really. Some experts accuse him of wishful thinking, and say the singularity will be as gentle as a pat on the back from a diplodocus. Back in 2015 Stephen Hawking said AI "could spell the end of the human race", while Elon Musk warned AI-led warfare would be worse than nuclear weapons.

So what's Altman's plan to avoid that?

A global body of regulators to guide AI. They would test technology to ensure it's safe, and guarantee it aligns with human needs and values.

As opposed to...?

Destroying all life as we know it with one press of a button. Good luck finding any lakes to swim in then.

BEST FREE SOFTWARE

You'll master in minutes...

Don't waste time and effort getting to grips with needlessly complicated programs. Robert Irvine reveals the 20 simplest free tools for performing everyday tasks

It's always exciting to discover a free PC program that offers advanced features you usually have to pay for. It's also interesting to try new open-source tools from independent developers on GitHub (www.github.com).

But that buzz can quickly drain away after you download and install a program only to find it bewildering to use. Common obstacles include cluttered interfaces, unlabelled toolbar buttons, mysterious menu options, settings that require configuration, and a lack of helpful guidance, such as tooltips or setup 'wizards'.

Whereas most paid-for software is thoroughly tested and documented to ensure users are satisfied with their purchase, some free tools have a steep learning curve. With no manual or customer support, you may end up uninstalling the program before giving it a chance.

Thankfully, not all free software is a baffling ordeal and there are lots of great tools that strike the right balance between simplicity and useful features. Here we reveal 20 free programs you can master in minutes (or less), which will leave you rubbing your hands with satisfaction rather than scratching your head in confusion.

We've picked tools for a variety of PC and web tasks, which have simple interfaces, work quickly, require little setup and focus on essential options. We've also suggested which complex tools you can now avoid.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Uninstall lots of unwanted programs with a single click
- Edit photos without being baffled by advanced options
- Back up your important files and folders automatically
- Share files instantly between your computer and phone
- Tweak Windows privacy settings to stop Microsoft spying on you
- Restore the simplicity of the Windows Mail app

CLEAN UP & SPEED UP YOUR PC

1 Wise Program Uninstaller

www.snipca.com/55188

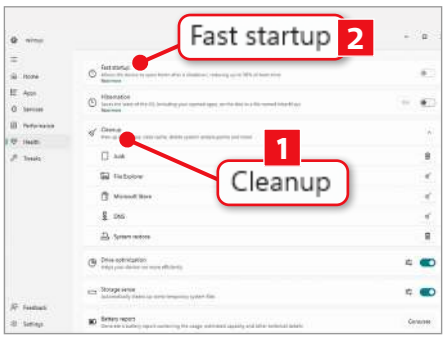
Uninstalling unwanted software is a task that should be straightforward but some uninstallers make the process needlessly complicated. For example, Bulk Crap Uninstaller (www.bcuninstaller.com) has a bloated and confusing interface with 'advanced operations' you'll never use.

In contrast, Wise Program Uninstaller puts a friendly face on removing junk, allowing you to uninstall multiple programs in one go simply by clicking the green Uninstall button top right (1 in our screenshot below). You can optionally create a system restore point before removal and delete 'residual' leftover traces afterwards.

Wise Program Uninstaller automatically detects and lists all the desktop software, Microsoft Store apps (which it still calls Metro apps, the name Miccrosoft used for Windows 8 – our only complaint about the program) and system components installed on your PC. Usefully, it tells you when you installed and last used them, their size and how they've been rated (out of five) by other users,

Wise goes further than other uninstallers by letting you remove junk browser extensions from Chrome, Firefox and Edge 2. There's also a Custom Uninstall option for manually selecting the folders of software that can't be uninstalled in the usual way.

Programs are removed swiftly, without pestering you with 'are you sure?' prompts, and there's a Force Uninstall button if your first attempt fails. You can view your Uninstall History by clicking the menu button in the top-right corner.



Wintoys is packed with useful features, including Cleanup and 'Fast startup'

2 Wintoys

www.snipca.com/55189

There are lots of tools for optimising your PC's performance by tweaking settings and deleting junk, including some built into Windows. But powerful programs such as Autoruns (www.snipca.com/55193) and BleachBit (www.bleachbit.org) can seem daunting and may do more harm than good if you change, remove or disable something you shouldn't.

Wintoys packs a huge range of features – including a software uninstaller, services manager and startup manager – into a simple interface, which saves you installing several separate programs. However, its most useful functions are on its Health tab and can be activated or deactivated with a single click.

We particularly like the Cleanup option (1 in our screenshot above), which makes it easy to wipe junk files, browser caches, old Windows updates and system restore points. The 'Fast startup' setting 2 can speed up your boot time by 50 per cent, while 'System updates' lets you disable Windows updates or limit them to security patches.

Wintoys clearly explains what each of its options do when you hover your cursor over their sliders, and because most are linked to Windows' own settings, there's no risk of breaking your PC.

On the Tweaks tab, you can customise your desktop, Start menu and File Explorer to your preference, change your privacy settings to stop Microsoft spying on you and disable its ads and 'suggestions'. Wintoys even lets you enable the fabled God mode in Windows 10 and 11 – select Superuser to find this option.

3 DupeGuru

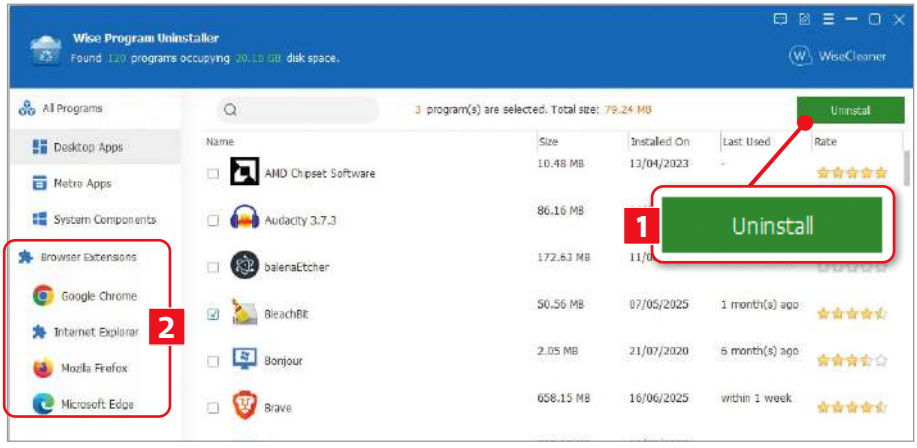
www.snipca.com/55197

Much as we like the versatile duplicate cleaner AllDup (www.snipca.com/55195), its crowded toolbars and numerous options give it a steep learning curve. When all you want to do is delete copies of files from your hard drive, AllDup makes it difficult to know where to start.

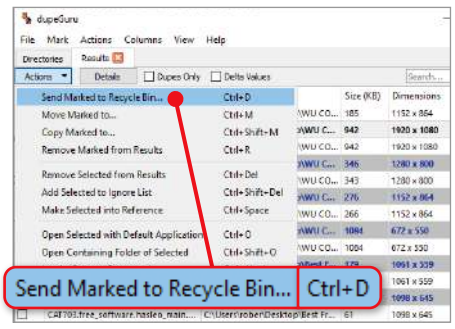
DupeGuru is a much simpler alternative, with only three 'scan modes' to choose from. 'Standard' mode looks for duplicate files in all formats, while the Music and Picture modes focus on audio and image files. Its lack of advanced features makes it very easy to use – just pick your mode, choose the folder(s) you want to check and click the Scan button in the bottom-right corner.

DupeGuru's scans are fast and accurate, using 'fuzzy logic' to identify duplicates with different names to the original files, or you can choose to only match items with the same name. The results are clearly presented, with the original files highlighted in blue.

To delete duplicates, tick the boxes next to them (or press Ctrl+A to select all) then click the Actions menu and choose 'Send Marked to Recycle Bin' (see screenshot below). Alternatively, press Ctrl+D to permanently delete selected items.



Wise Program Uninstaller makes it easy to uninstall unwanted software, including browser extensions



DupeGuru offers a simple way to find and delete duplicate files

CAPTURE & EDIT IMAGES AND VIDEOS

4 Snipping Tool

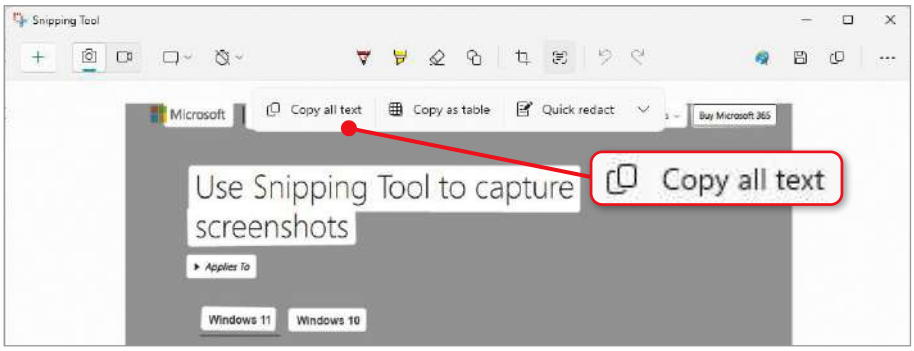
www.snipca.com/55198

ShareX (www.snipca.com/53506) is a great program, but it uses a proverbial sledgehammer to crack a nut – or in its case, take a screenshot. It now includes so many options that capturing what's on your screen seems like a mere formality before you explore its editing, annotating and sharing tools.

So we're pleased Microsoft has significantly improved its Snipping Tool, combining it with 'Snip & Sketch' and adding several useful features without sacrificing speed or simplicity. These additions include recording videos of your screen (with audio) and using OCR to extract text from screenshots (see screenshot above right).

You can also annotate your grabs, edit them in Microsoft Paint and share them to other apps and devices, but unlike in ShareX these features don't distract you from screen captures – Snipping Tool retains its simple three-button panel for this purpose. The only option we could do without is 'Visual Search with Bing'.

Sadly, the new Snipping Tool is only available in Windows 11. Windows 10 users must make do with the old version and 'Snip & Sketch'. As recommended in our Readers' Tips section in Issue 710 (page 40), Wintoys (see previous page) includes a setting that lets you launch Snipping Tool by pressing the Print Screen key rather than Windows+Shift+S.



Snipping Tool has added useful features – such as extracting text from screenshots – without losing its simplicity

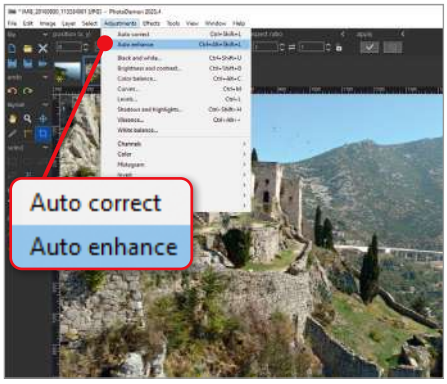
5 PhotoDemon

www.snipca.com/55086

The open-source image editor GIMP (www.gimp.org) provides an incredible set of features for free – and supports plug-ins that add even more. It's ideal for photographers, designers and artists who want to save money on Adobe Photoshop, but for quick photo edits GIMP can be challenging to master.

PhotoDemon is a more suitable option for home users, offering lots of useful tools for editing and enhancing your photos, in an uncluttered and easy-to-use interface. Rather than bamboozle you with features, it's as basic or advanced as you need it to be.

At its simplest, you can use PhotoDemon to crop, rotate, flip and resize images, and adjust their brightness, contrast and colours – select 'Auto correct' or 'Auto enhance' to save time (see screenshot above right). If you're feeling more creative, the Effects menu lets you experiment with filters, styles and perspective – we particularly like the Artistic options for transforming photos into drawings and paintings.



PhotoDemon can be used for basic edits and creative enhancements

PhotoDemon can remove unwanted objects and people using its 'Content-aware fill' feature. Select the element you want to delete using the Elliptical Selection tool in the left-hand toolbar, then click the Edit menu and choose 'Content-aware fill'. PhotoDemon will clone pixels from the surrounding area to fill the gap.

If you're comfortable working with layers or want to install Photoshop plug-ins, it includes those options too. PhotoDemon doesn't require installation, so pin its shortcut to your taskbar for easy access.

6 OpenShot Video Editor

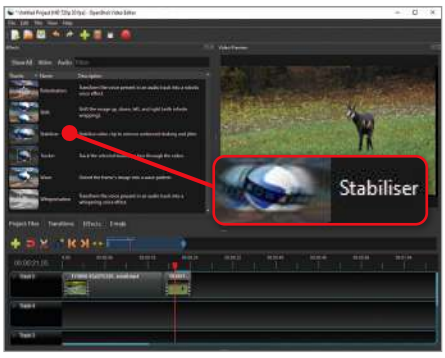
www.openshot.org

As with image editors, some free video editors – such as DaVinci Resolve (www.snipca.com/55200) and Kdenlive (www.snipca.com/55201) – rival expensive professional software in terms of the quantity and quality of features they offer. But their advanced capabilities also make them tricky to master without constantly referring to their online manuals.

OpenShot has been expressly designed to be easy to use and quick to learn, without skimping on powerful video-editing tools. Like most video editors, it has a timeline you drag your clips to, before adding music, transitions and captions, then trimming your videos into slick home movies.

The program offers dozens of effects including a handy AI-powered Stabiliser option (see screenshot below) that reduces camera shake, and an Object Detector feature that tracks objects and people throughout a video. Other effects can fix brightness, contrast and colour problems, and adjust the volume of foreground and background sounds.

OpenShot lets you speed up, slow down and reverse videos, as well as add freeze frames and zooms, by right-clicking a clip and choosing Time. There's no limit on the number of tracks on your timeline, and you can separate the audio track from a video to edit them individually. If you do get stuck, consult OpenShot's excellent user guide at www.snipca.com/55202.



OpenShot makes editing your videos much easier than rival software

BACK UP & SYNC YOUR FILES

7 Google Drive for Desktop

www.snipca.com/55208

Microsoft is so keen for us to store and sync our files in OneDrive that it makes the service unavoidable. It's integrated with File Explorer, included with Microsoft 365 and has a built-in app in Windows 11.

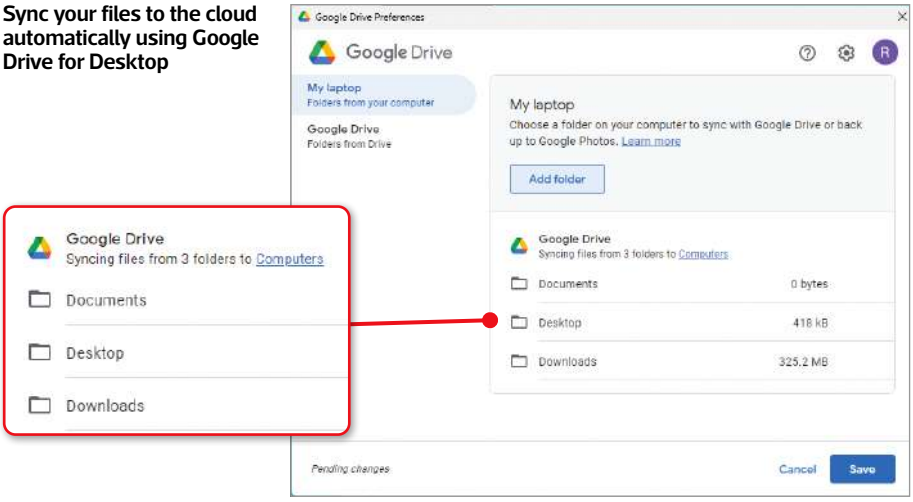
Although not difficult to use, some Windows users find OneDrive to be slow and unreliable at uploading and downloading files. Alternative services such as Nextcloud (www.nextcloud.com) can be tricky to set up and may have smaller storage limits than OneDrive's 5GB.

Google Drive for Desktop offers a simpler syncing solution, yet many Google users are unaware it exists. Rather than manually upload files to Drive, you select specific folders to sync, such as Desktop, Documents and Downloads (see screenshot below), and can optionally back up your Pictures and Videos folders to Google Photos.

Any files added to these folders are automatically synced to your online account, and won't take up any space on your hard drive – unless you choose to 'mirror' them. That means files will be stored both in the cloud and on your PC, so it's better to 'stream' them if you don't have much hard-drive space. Google Drive gives you 15GB of free storage – three times as much as OneDrive.

You can access Google Drive through File Explorer and open files on your computer in their default programs. Files created in Google Docs, Sheets and Slides will open in your browser.

Google Drive also lets you make important folders available offline by right-clicking them and choosing that option. Click its system-tray icon to view recent activity, ensure everything is up to date and pause syncing if necessary.



Sync your files to the cloud automatically using Google Drive for Desktop

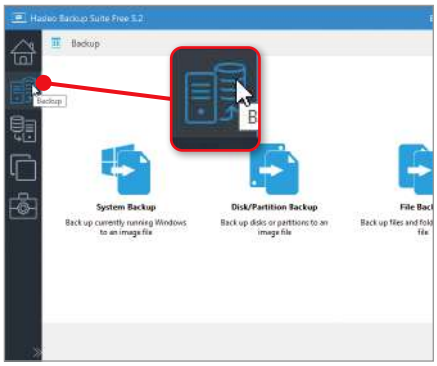
8 Hasleo Backup Suite

www.snipca.com/55222

Backing up an entire hard drive or partition is a daunting task that's not made easier by most backup tools. Advanced programs such as Clonezilla (www.clonezilla.org) use technical terminology and need to be booted from a USB stick, while those with friendly interfaces like EaseUS Todo Backup (www.snipca.com/55223) restrict some options to their paid-for versions and nag you to upgrade.

Hasleo Backup Suite is free and straightforward to use, with no options locked behind Upgrade buttons. Simply click New Backup on its Home screen or the Backup button in its left-hand toolbar (see screenshot below) to choose from three options.

System Backup backs up your current version of Windows to an image file on an external or alternative internal drive, while Disk/Partition Backup backs up individual drives and partitions. The 'File Backup' option backs up selected files and folders to an image file. Select a destination, then either click Proceed to perform the backup now or create a backup schedule – this lets you choose between full, incremental and differential backups.



Hasleo Backup Suite can back up your whole PC or specific drives or folders

Click 'Backup options' to change the compression level of your backups and enable encryption to secure them. To restore files you've backed up, click the Restore button in the left toolbar and choose either 'Select task to restore' or 'Browse image to restore'.

Hasleo Backup Suite includes extra tools for cloning Windows, creating an emergency and wiping disks, but you can easily ignore these to focus on backups.

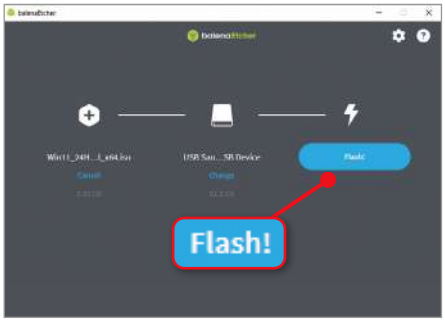
9 BalenaEtcher

www.snipca.com/55227

We often recommend Rufus (www.snipca.com/54712) as the best free tool for creating a bootable version of Windows or Linux on a USB stick. But while Rufus works very well, when you simply want to write a disc-image file to removable media it isn't immediately obvious how to get started with the program.

BalenaEtcher simplifies the process of burning (which it calls 'flashing') an ISO file to a USB to stick or SD card to just three steps. Select 'Flash from file' or 'Flash from URL' to add the ISO (BalenaEtcher also supports other disc-image formats) then 'Select target' to choose the destination drive. Click 'Flash' (see screenshot below) to burn the disc image to the USB stick or SD card. Note that balenaEtcher can't create bootable versions of Windows.

If you experience any problems, try running balenaEtcher as an administrator – right-click its entry in your Start menu and choose that option.



BalenaEtcher makes it easy to burn ISO files to a USB stick

EDIT AUDIO FILES & CONTROL VOLUME

10 Ocenaudio

www.ocenaudio.com

Audacity (www.snipca.com/55232) is an amazing free audio editor, offering all the tools you need to edit music, voice recordings and other sound files. The problem is it also includes lots of features you probably won't need, which makes its interface overwhelming.

Ocenaudio replicates Audacity's essential features and waveform editor, but without the baffling toolbar and menu options. This makes it much easier to edit and enhance your audio files, whether you want to trim unwanted sections, normalise the volume or fade the track in or out.

Click the Effects menu to access features for adjusting the tempo and pitch, applying reverb and vibrato, and reducing or silencing noise. You can save edited tracks in various formats, including MP3, WAV and FLAC.

Like Audacity, Ocenaudio also lets you record directly into the program – click the Controls menu and choose Record (see screenshot above right) or press R.

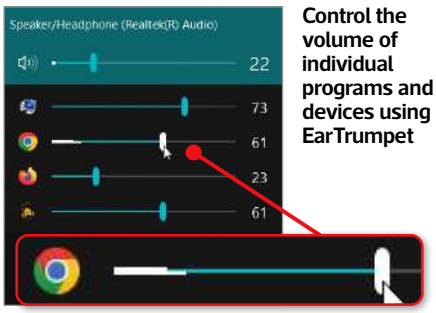
Ocenaudio offers the best features of Audacity, including direct recording, without the confusing ones

11 EarTrumpet

www.snipca.com/55228

Clicking the speaker icon on the Windows taskbar lets you increase or decrease the overall volume on your PC, but doesn't control individual audio sources. The third-party tool WALE (Windows Audio Loudness Equalizer, www.snipca.com/55229) allows you to set the volume level of different programs, but even its developer admits it's not the easiest program to master.

Instead, they recommend – as do we – the wonderfully simple EarTrumpet. This free audio mixer lets you adjust the volume levels of different software and hardware on your PC in a matter of seconds.



Control the volume of individual programs and devices using EarTrumpet

Click EarTrumpet's system-tray icon – this looks like the Windows speaker icon and may be in the 'Show hidden icons' flyout menu – to open its panel of sliders. These control the volume of all your sound-enabled programs and audio devices, including your browser, media player, speakers and headphones. Drag the sliders left or right (see screenshot above) to boost or reduce the volume of each source.

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BOOST YOUR PC & ONLINE PRIVACY

12 O&O ShutUp10++
www.snipca.com/55235

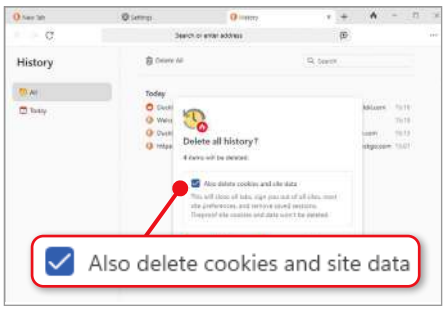
There are so many ways Microsoft can spy on you in Windows 10 and 11 that it's no wonder lots of tools have sprung up to stop this happening. In the past year, we've written about several new programs for tweaking your privacy settings, including the now discontinued Bloatynosy and the ludicrously named – and confusingly technical – Privacy.sexy (www.snipca.com/55236).

None even comes close to the quality and simplicity of O&O ShutUp10++. Within its smart, minimalist interface, this fantastic free tool lets you disable nearly 100 Windows settings that compromise your privacy and allow Microsoft to foist unwanted junk on you – including ads and 'suggestions'.

In Windows, these settings are deliberately spread out and tucked away, so O&O ShutUp10++ presents them in two long lists: one for the current user (you) and the other the local machine (your whole PC). These are organised into categories such as Privacy, Security, Location Services, Microsoft Edge and Windows Update, and O&O recently added options to disable Copilot, Recall and other AI features.

Each setting is colour-coded to indicate whether O&O recommends disabling it or leaving it alone. Click a setting for a full explanation of its purpose and what will happen if you turn it off.

To save time tweaking individual settings, click the Actions menu and choose 'Apply only recommended settings' (see screenshot below). You can create a system restore point before making changes.



DuckDuckGo has added new privacy features without becoming bloated

13 DuckDuckGo
www.snipca.com/55239

All the main web browsers are becoming bloated with extra tools that you may or may not find useful. This includes *Computeractive* favourite Brave (www.brave.com), which seems to be focusing less on privacy features and more on its AI assistant Leo.

DuckDuckGo has also added an AI chatbot to its browser, but you'll hardly notice it's there – it's the speech-bubble icon at the end of the address bar. Other new options have been quietly added without any effect on the browser's minimalist appearance.

These include a new History page that lists the sites you've visited and lets you delete them all – and their related cookies and data (see screenshot above) – with a single click. Alternatively, you can have DuckDuckGo automatically clear your tabs and browsing data every time you close the browser. To set this up, click the menu button, choose Settings then Data Clearing, and select the new option 'Automatically clear tabs and browsing data when DuckDuckGo exits'.

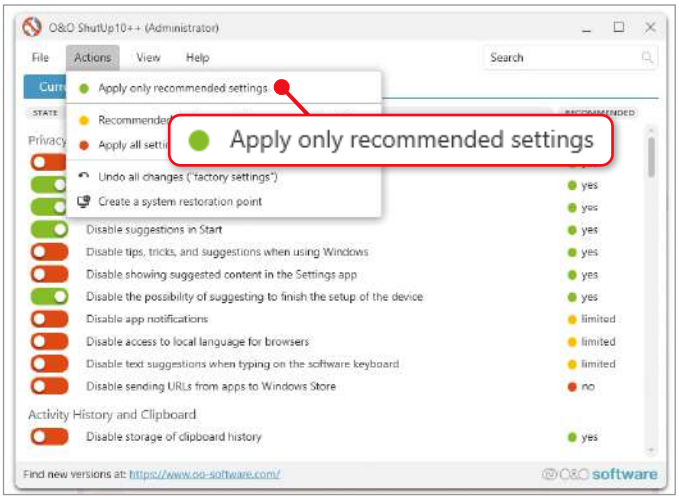
Whereas some private browsers require you to manually switch on settings to block ads, trackers and cookie-consent pop-ups, in DuckDuckGo they're enabled by default. We also love its Duck Player, which lets you watch YouTube videos without seeing personalised ads and recommendations.

14 TunnelBear Free
www.tunnelbear.com

Ideally a VPN should be as simple to use as choosing a server in your desired country and clicking Connect. But in practice, some VPNs can seem dry and technical – even our favourite free service, Windscribe (www.windscribe.com), has confusing settings that refer to LAN traffic, packet size and MAC spoofing.

TunnelBear puts a friendly face on browsing the web anonymously, and not just because of its cute bear animations. Connecting to a VPN server involves little more than clicking a tunnel on the map, and its settings are kept to a minimum and clearly explained. They include SplitBear for split tunneling (excluding certain programs and websites from VPN protection); GhostBear, which makes encrypted traffic look like standard browsing; and VigilantBear, which is TunnelBear's 'kill switch'.

TunnelBear's free plan now gives you 2GB of data per month (increased from 500MB in 2023) and lets you connect to servers in 47 countries around the world. These include the US (see screenshot below), Canada and Australia. Its paid-for plan, which offers unlimited data and devices, and 'premium' servers, costs £10 per month.


O&O ShutUp10++ (Administrator)
File
Actions
View
Help
Search
Apply only recommended settings
Undo all changes ("factory settings")
Create a system restoration point
Disable suggestions in Start
Disable tips, tricks, and suggestions when using Windows
Disable showing suggested content in the Settings app
Disable the possibility of suggesting to finish the setup of the device
Disable app notifications
Disable access to local language for browsers
Disable text suggestions when typing on the software keyboard
Disable sending URLs from apps to Windows Store
Activity History and Clipboard
Disable storage of clipboard history
Find new versions at: https://www.oo-software.com/
O&O software

O&O ShutUp10++ is the best tool for tweaking Windows privacy settings

TunnelBear gives VPNs a friendly face and offers 2GB of free data

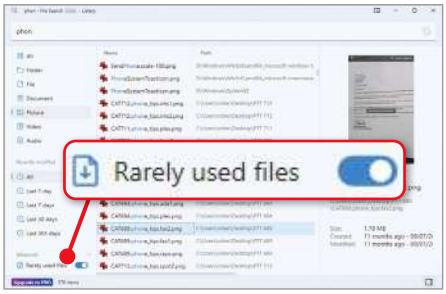
FIND & SHARE FILES FASTER

15 Listary
www.listary.com

The built-in Windows search tool is notoriously unreliable, often failing to find files and pushing you to search the web with Bing instead. Many PC experts recommend using Everything (www.snipca.com/55244) to index and search the contents of your hard drive, but we find its dated interface uninviting and some of its settings – such as 'Rescan on buffer' and 'Enable USN Journal' – incomprehensible.

Listary offers a simpler, smarter and speedier way to search for files and folders. Start typing a query into its search box, and the program will instantly display matching results in the main area below. You can filter these by file type – such as document, picture or video – and when they were last modified (within the last day, week, month or year). Previews of images are shown in the panel on the right.

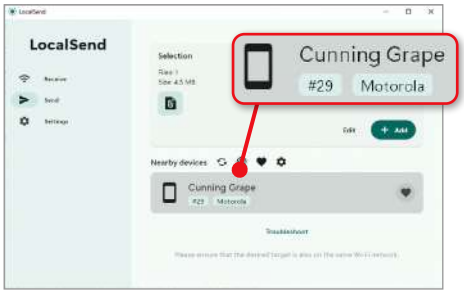
Recognising that most searches will be for old files whose whereabouts are unknown, Listary also has a 'Rarely used files' option (see screenshot above) that digs deeper into your hard drive. The program is free for personal use, but you can get more features by upgrading to Listary Pro for £15.42.



Listary instantly finds files on your hard drive, including rarely used items

16 LocalSend
www.snipca.com/55243

There are lots of ways to share files between your PC and phone – email, Bluetooth, online storage – but none are as easy and fast as LocalSend. Unlike Microsoft's Phone Link app, which can only transfer files to and from select Android devices, LocalSend works across Windows, Android, iOS, macOS and Linux, and its interface couldn't be simpler.



LocalSend quickly transfers files from your PC to your phone and vice versa

Install the LocalSend app on your computer and mobile devices, and – provided they're connected to the same Wi-Fi network – they'll recognise either's codenames. These are themed around fruit and vegetables, such as Cunning Grape (see screenshot above).

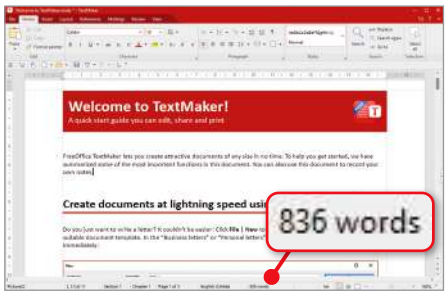
You can then send files and folders from your PC to your phone, and vice versa, with a single click or tap. On the receiving device, click or tap Accept to complete the transfer, and save the shared item to your Downloads folder or media library.

CREATE & EDIT OFFICE FILES

17 SoftMaker FreeOffice
www.snipca.com/55249

The free office suite LibreOffice (www.libreoffice.org) is a superb alternative to Microsoft Office/365, offering many of the same features along with lots of its own. But its cluttered and unfamiliar interface (for Office users) means it can take a while to master.

SoftMaker FreeOffice addresses this concern by letting you choose between an Office-style ribbon design and 'classic' menus and toolbars. It automatically adds shortcuts to your taskbar for its TextMaker word processor, PlanMaker spreadsheet tool and PowerPoint equivalent Presentations, so you can access them at the click of a button.



SoftMaker FreeOffice has plenty of tools but is easier to master than LibreOffice

Between them, these tools include all the options you need for creating, editing and printing documents, spreadsheets and presentations. We especially like that TextMaker shows the current word count in its Status bar (see screenshot below left) – just like Microsoft Word.

FreeOffice supports the Microsoft Office formats DOCX, XLSX and PPTX, so you won't have problems opening those files. Some features, such as macros and cloud integration, are limited to SoftMaker Office Professional, which costs £110, but the free version will be enough for most home users.

18 PDFgear
www.pdfgear.com

Until PDFgear arrived in 2023, our favourite free alternative to Adobe Acrobat Reader was PDF24 (www.pdf24.org). That program now looks like a ragbag of tools in a clunky interface, whereas PDFgear combines its many features into a slick, friendly interface.

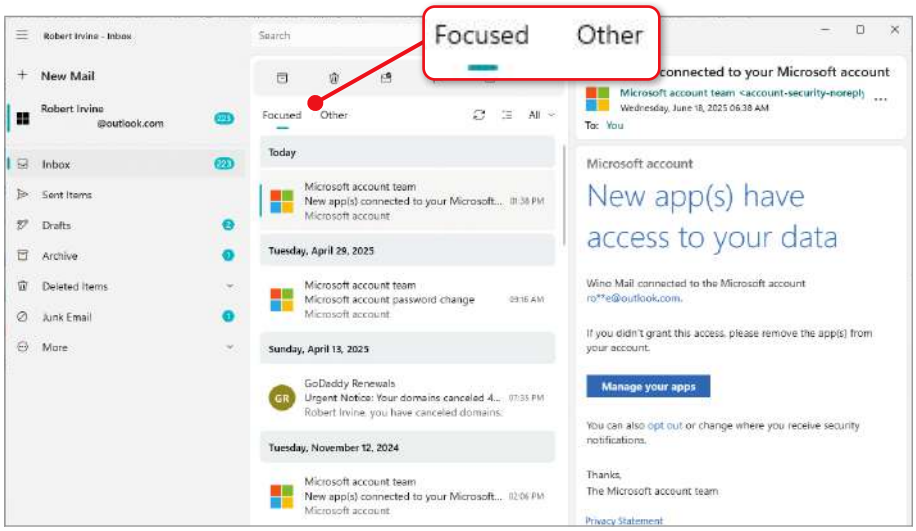
Its welcome screen lets you perform quick tasks such as merging, splitting and converting PDFs – to and from formats including Word, Excel and JPEG. Click 'Open File' or New PDF to open the main PDF editor and access an array of useful options in PDFgear's clearly presented toolbar.

PDFgear is packed with useful features, including a Screenshot tool

Notable features include capturing screenshots of PDF content (see screenshot above), extracting text using OCR and editing the words and images in documents. PDFgear lets you create PDFs from scratch, such as fillable forms, and add all kinds of elements including watermarks, stamps and signatures.

It's very versatile for a free program, yet easy to use. And if you don't need its AI chatbot to analyse and summarise your PDFs, you can close its sidebar.

SIMPLIFY YOUR EMAILS, CALLS & MESSAGES



Wino Mail replicates the look and simplicity of Windows Mail

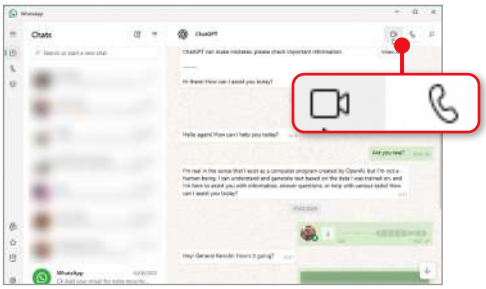
19 Wino Mail

www.winomail.app

Windows users who miss the old Mail app (discontinued at the end of last year) and don't like the new Outlook app, are often directed towards Mozilla Thunderbird (www.thunderbird.net). It's an excellent email client with lots of features, but because Mozilla doesn't explain how to use them, Thunderbird can seem confusing at first.

Wino Mail keeps things simple by aiming to be the "perfect native replacement for Windows Mail". Its free plan lets you easily add three email accounts – including Outlook, Gmail and iCloud – and read, reply to and compose messages in its impressively uncluttered interface.

Like Outlook, it has Focused and Other tabs (see screenshot above), to keep your Inbox tidy, and you can delete, archive and mark emails as unread by right-clicking them. To place these options in a toolbar at the top of your inbox and other folders, click the Settings cog, choose Message List and switch on 'Show mail list actions'.



Chat easily and privately on your PC using WhatsApp Desktop

20 WhatsApp Desktop

www.snipca.com/55253

WhatsApp has made some controversial changes recently (see page 7), but it's still the easiest and most popular way to chat to people on your phone. Its Desktop app brings its simple functionality to your PC as a friendlier alternative to the business-oriented Microsoft Teams.

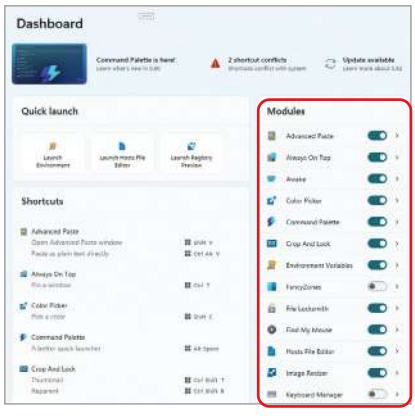
To set up WhatsApp on your computer, you scan a QR code in the mobile app. This almost instantly links the devices and downloads your messages to the Windows app. Here you can chat to friends and family as normal, record and send voice notes, and make and receive voice and video calls, with the benefits of a much larger screen and keyboard. Your messages remain end-to-end encrypted.

PowerToys could soon be easier to use

We're huge fans of PowerToys (www.snipca.com/55256), but we wouldn't call it easy to use – hence its omission from this feature. The more tools Microsoft adds to the system-utility suite, the more unwieldy it becomes, which makes it harder to find specific settings.

Thankfully, that could soon change as the PowerToys developers are working on a new Dashboard for the app, which resembles a Windows 11 settings screen. This will provide easier access to its 28 (and counting) modules (see screenshot) and their respective settings, and let you enable and disable them at the flick of a switch.

The revamped Dashboard will also include a list of keyboard shortcuts for various PowerToys actions, such as launching Command Palette, so you won't need to memorise them. There's no word yet on when it will be introduced, but it will certainly make PowerToys easier to master. ca



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Stop AI stealing your face

AI tools are fantastic, but you must use them privately. **Jonathan Parkyn** explains how to stop them collecting personal data such as your photos and what you type

As we noted in Issue 711's Cover Feature (page 50), AI-powered tools, chatbots and image generators can be a great way to save time, spark ideas and make life a lot easier. But not everyone is comfortable letting an AI tool into their lives. Many people are concerned that they collect sensitive information that you type and use your photos to train themselves.

Different AI companies have their own privacy policies, data practices and terms of use. Some don't store anything you type or upload, while others do. Some have clear opt-out settings, while others offer little transparency. Under UK GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018, images of your face are considered biometric data and should require explicit consent, but it's often not clear how strictly AI companies adhere to this.

As a general rule, don't share any personal information with a chatbot that you wouldn't be comfortable handing to a stranger. That includes information within your text conversations and voice commands, as well as documents and photos you upload. Even if you disable all the settings we suggest below, confidential content can linger somewhere inside the AI company's backups, or find its way into the wrong hands via a data breach.

Prevent ChatGPT from stealing your photos

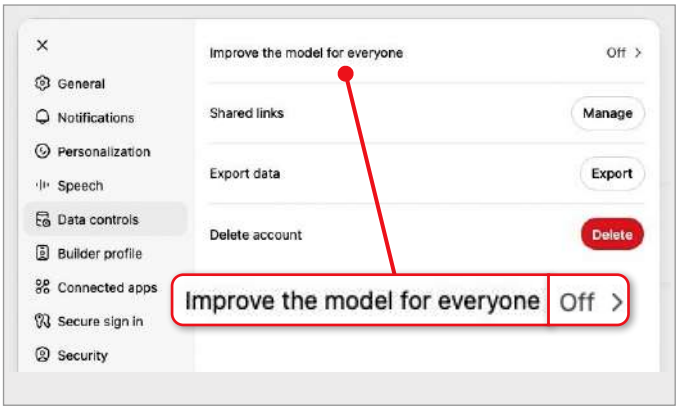
Recent trends on social media have seen people using AI-powered tools to turn photos of themselves into everything from boxed Barbie dolls to Disney or *Simpsons*-style cartoon characters. This may seem harmless enough until you consider what the company that owns the AI tool may be doing with the photos you upload.

Take ChatGPT, for example. You can view parent company OpenAI's privacy policy at www.snipca.com/55205. And, while there's no specific clause about images of your own likeness, it states that user-submitted content – including images you upload – may be used to analyse, research and improve services and models, unless you actively opt out via settings.

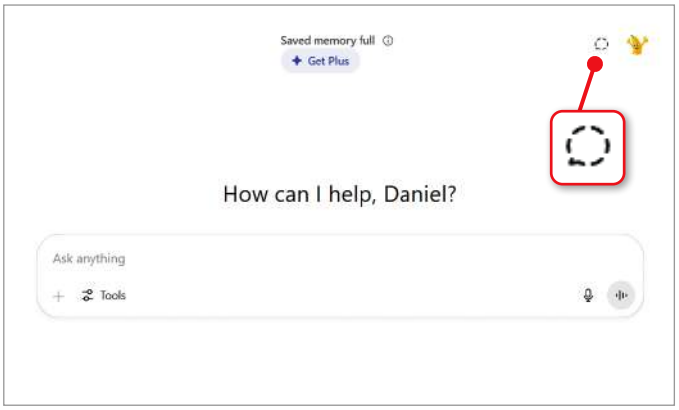
Thankfully, this is straightforward. Log into your account at https://chatgpt.com, then click your top-right icon and select Settings. Now click 'Data controls' on the left and turn off 'Improve the model for everyone' (see screenshot below left).

Delete your images and chats from ChatGPT

ChatGPT stores your chat history, so you can return to any previous project or conversation and pick up where you left off. But you can delete chats if you're worried about information or images you've previously shared.

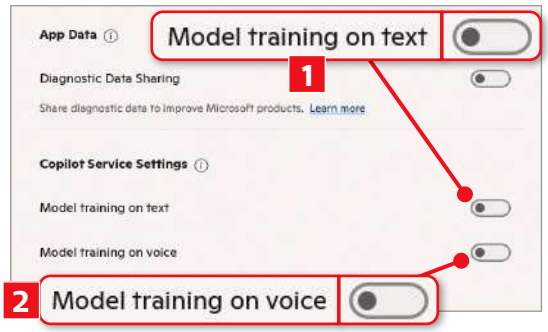


Turn off this setting to stop ChatGPT training itself on photos of you



Click this icon to have a chat in ChatGPT without it being saved

You can stop Google's human team seeing your comments in Gemini, and delete what you've already typed



Turn off both these settings to stop Microsoft's Copilot analysing what you type

To delete an individual chat, move your cursor over it in the sidebar until you see the three dots (ellipsis) button – click this, then select Delete. This removes the entire conversation, including any text, images and files you uploaded. Your content will no longer be used to train or improve AI models. You can delete your entire history by clicking your user icon, Settings, General then 'Delete all'.

You can also use ChatGPT without it saving your chats – think of it like using a private (incognito) browser tab. To do this, start a new chat, then click 'Turn on temporary chat' at the top right (see screenshot below left).

Stop Google Gemini taking your data

By default, Google Gemini does not use personal content from other Google services, such as Gmail, Maps, Search and Photos to train its machine-learning technologies. That said, its human researchers do read, annotate and process your Gemini conversations for the purposes of improving its services. These are anonymised, so Google doesn't know it's you, but the company warns against entering "confidential information in your conversations or any data you wouldn't want a reviewer to see or Google to use".

To prevent your data being seen by humans, log into https://gemini.google.com, then click the Activity button toward the bottom of the left-hand sidebar. In the 'Your Gemini Apps activity' page that opens, click 'Turn off' (1 in our screenshot above left), then 'Turn off' again 2. Google stores your Gemini activity for up to 18 months by default, but you can delete this here.

You can also delete individual conversations by clicking the 'X' next to them, or click the Delete button 3 then either select a date range or click Always to delete it all. Note that chats are saved in your account for up to 72 hours, whether the Gemini Apps activity setting is turned on or off.

Stop Microsoft's Copilot's analysing your data

Files, including images, you upload to Microsoft's Copilot are stored for up to 30 days before being deleted. Microsoft does not use files or images you upload for model training, but it does analyse and use data from your text conversations to improve its services – unless you opt out.

However, Microsoft makes it difficult to do this. You need to log into either the desktop or mobile app with your Microsoft account, then click your user icon, Settings, Privacy and make sure that 'Model training on text' (1 in our screenshot above) and 'Model training on voice' 2 are both turned off.

To delete your Copilot history, log in at https://account.microsoft.com, then click Privacy, Copilot and click 'Delete all activity history' in both the 'Copilot app activity history' and 'Copilot in Microsoft 365 apps' sections.

Turn off your history in ImageFX

According to the number of times readers clicked its Snipca link, ImageFX (www.snipca.com/54057) was the most popular AI image-generation tool in Issue 706's Cover Feature ('Your complete AI guide'). As it's run by Google Labs, it comes under the same privacy policy as Gemini (see left), so human reviewers can see what you type. You can't currently upload photos to ImageFX, so it can't store images that identify you.

Make ImageFX more private by disabling the History feature. Click your user icon, then select 'My library' followed by the three vertical dots. Now switch off 'Enable history'. Note this means you'll need to download all the images you generate, as they won't be stored online.

Use a chatbot without logging in

To guarantee your anonymity when you use AI, opt for a tool that lets you start a conversation without logging in. Generally speaking, you'll need to access them via a specific URL, rather than an app. You may find you're limited to basic models without advanced features, such as uploading files and generating images.

To use ChatGPT without logging in, go to https://chat.openai.com and click the 'Stay logged out' option. Similarly, go to https://copilot.microsoft.com to try Microsoft's AI chatbot without logging in, and https://gemini.google.com for Google Gemini. ca

Find and take down public photos of yourself

It's a smart move to take down as many public photos of yourself from the internet as possible. AI models are often trained on vast datasets scraped from the web – ie, images that are publicly available. That means your face could end up in a facial-recognition system or be used to generate AI images, without your knowledge or consent.

Check your social-media settings to make sure you're not inadvertently sharing photos of yourself and your loved ones publicly. You can also use the 'face search engine' PimEyes (https://pimeyes.com) to find photos of yourself online (pictured), then use its Opt-Out Request form (www.snipca.com/49321) to get any images you want taken down. Bear in mind that unlocking the full results will cost you a one-off fee of £13.99, but you'll see a preview of the images it finds – if there are lots, it could well be worth paying for.

See our feature in Issue 678 (page 60) for more information on taking down public photos of yourself.

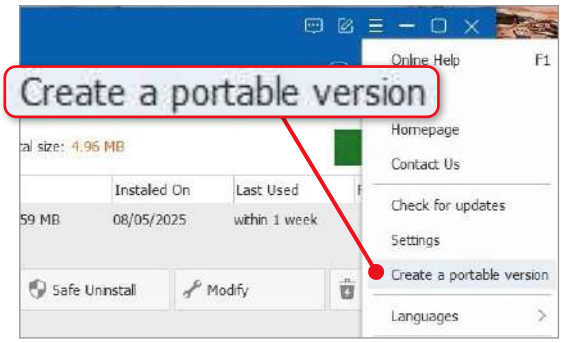
10 PC MISTAKES WE'VE FINALLY STOPPED MAKING

Even experienced PC users fall into bad habits. Here, four *Computeractive* writers confess to errors they used to make and what they now do to avoid them

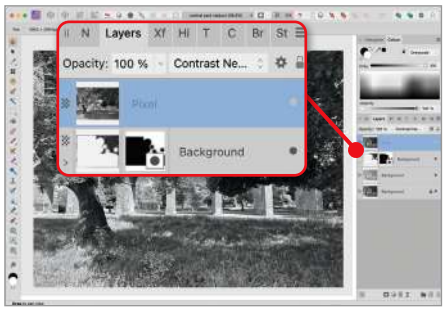
JONATHAN PARKYN

1 Saving too many files on the desktop

I used to save everything to my Windows desktop – files, documents, software, the lot. I thought it was the only way to know where they were, but it made my desktop a complete mess.



Jonathan runs the portable version of Wise Program Uninstaller from his USB stick



Nik uses layers to edit photos with greater freedom

What I do now

Now I only keep shortcuts to tools and apps on my desktop, plus any documents that I'm currently working on. Everything else gets filed in sub-folders within my Documents, Downloads and Photos folders. I also use descriptive file names, so they give a clear idea of the files' content, such as 'Summer_Fete_Flyer_July2025.pdf'. This makes them easy to find in Windows Search.

2 Relying on Windows' tools to uninstall junk

As a tech journalist, I probably install more software in a week than most people do in a year. For ages I assumed the best way to remove these was using Windows' built-in uninstaller.

What I do now

Windows' uninstaller kept leaving loads of junk behind, so I switched to Wise Program Uninstaller (www.snipca.com/55188). It's a lot more thorough yet wonderfully simple (see page 51). I don't even have it installed because I run the portable version from my USB stick – click the three horizontal lines at the top and select 'Create a portable version' (see screenshot above).

NIK RAWLINSON

3 Editing photos on a single layer

For years, I'd open a photo and immediately start editing. If I made a mistake – and only spotted it several edits later – I'd have to step back through every amendment until I could undo it.

What I do now

After cropping and reframing the image, I duplicate the layer on which it sits to preserve my master copy. Then I correct the colour using the Develop persona in Affinity Photo (www.snipca.com/55284, see screenshot above), or GIMP's Colors menu (www.gimp.org).

For more significant changes, like brightening dark foliage in trees, I make a more extreme third copy. I apply a mask so other parts of the image aren't burned out and over-exposed. This sits alongside the pixel layer. I can paint on to this in black, white or grey. If I make a mistake, I can fix it without re-working the whole image.

4 Editing JPEGs like they're RAW files

Keen to save space on my memory cards, I only ever used to shoot photos as JPEGs. The camera compresses and enhances these, so they look good when you download them, but additional information is lost. This limits your editing options.

What I do now

I've set my phone to save unedited RAW files alongside JPEGs. On Android, open the camera settings, tap Advanced, then activate 'RAW/JPEG control'. On iPhones, open Settings, tap Camera, Format, then turn on 'ProRAW & Resolution Control'. Digital cameras have similar settings.

The resulting RAW files are a copy of what the camera's sensor sees through the lens. The tones, contrast, sharpness and more can then be edited using a program like Adobe Lightroom (www.snipca.com/55285) – or, again, Affinity Photo. These don't affect changes to the edits already applied by the camera. Saving both RAW and JPEG (or HEIC format on the iPhone) side by side gives me the best of both worlds.

ROBERT IRVINE

5 Letting browser tabs hog system memory

I usually have loads of tabs open because I worry that if I close a web page I'll later realise it contained something important. This has often caused Chrome – and sometimes my PC – to freeze and crash, as idle web pages consume memory and deprive other programs of RAM.

What I do now

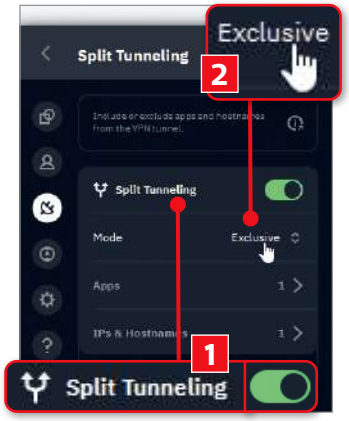
My fix was first to enable Memory Saver in Chrome, which frees up memory from inactive tabs – you'll find this in the Performance section of the browser's Settings. I then installed the extension OneTab (www.snipca.com/55266), which releases RAM from all open tabs except the current one, and converts them into a list. I can then restore tabs when needed.

6 Using a VPN without split tunnelling

I often forget to disconnect from VPNs after testing them, which has led to some websites – including BBC iPlayer and that of my bank – blocking my access because I appear to be outside the UK.

What I do now

Split tunnelling fixes this problem. It excludes one of my browsers (usually Brave) from the VPN's encryption and location spoofing. In my favourite free VPN, Windscribe (www.snipca.com/55267), this option (1 in our screenshot right) is in Settings, then Connection.



Robert now uses split tunneling to stop sites blocking his VPN

I selected Exclusive 2 as the Mode then clicked Apps and added my browser's EXE file to the exclusion list. Most VPNs have a similar option.

DANIEL BOOTH

7 Not using date filters in Gmail

Like many people, I use my email inbox as a temporary storage service. I *should* download or save important messages, but I get so many that some simply sink to the bottom waiting patiently for my attention.

What I do now

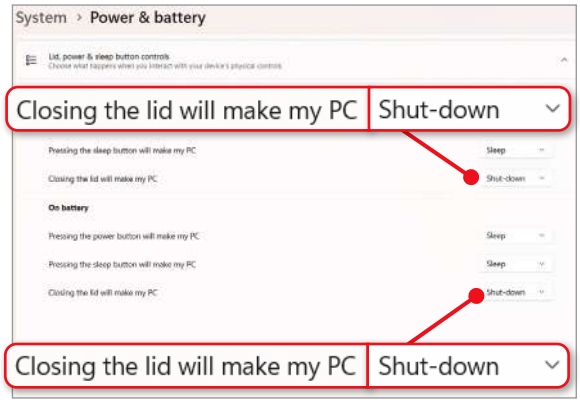
Using date filters now helps me find important emails. For example, typing after:2025/01/01 before:2025/07/01 combined with keywords (such as is:unread) or senders' names narrows results to messages received between 1 January and 1 July this year. Every search result has its own URL, which means you can bookmark it and click this to run the search again, updating its results.

8 Not backing up your router's settings

I was born amid 1973's power cuts, which couldn't have been easy for my parents. But at least they didn't have to reset their Wi-Fi router once power was restored. I had to do this several times a few years ago after blackouts knocked my router back to its factory settings. It took ages because I hadn't made a note of my preferred settings.

What I do now

Whenever I get a new router I save the settings online and to a USB stick. For my current router (TP-Link's Archer AX55) I opened its admin web page, and clicked Advanced, then System Tools followed by 'Backup & Restore'. I exported the settings as a config file, then saved it to a stick and OneDrive. When the lights next go out, I'll upload it on the same admin page to restore my settings.



Daniel has set his laptop to shut down whenever he closes the lid by turning on these two options

9 Not restarting laptop often enough

For years, whenever I closed my laptop a little voice at the back of my mind said, 'Right, that's turned off for the day' – even though I knew full well it was merely going to sleep.

What I do now

Sometimes my laptop went weeks without rebooting, piling up temporary files that made it sluggish. The solution is easy though – in Windows 11 press Windows key+I, then click 'Power & battery' followed by 'Lid, power and sleep button controls'. Now click both 'Closing the lid will make my PC' dropdown menus (see screenshot above) and select Shut-down.

This risks losing any unsaved content on my laptop, but I work mostly in online documents, which are saved automatically. In Windows 10, open Control Panel, 'Hardware and Sound', then Power Options.

10 Navigating File Explorer using my mouse

ChatGPT tells me I've used a mouse for roughly 75,000 hours, which explains why my poor fingers now regard it as an instrument of torture. One part of Windows that requires too many mouse clicks is File Explorer.

What I do now

I now use keyboard shortcuts. Press Windows key+E to open File Explorer, then the arrow keys to move up and down files, pressing Enter to open them. Alt+left arrow goes back to the previous file, while Alt+right goes forward. You can press Alt+up arrow to go up a folder level; Alt+D takes me to the address bar; and holding down the Shift key while using the arrow keys selects multiple files. ca

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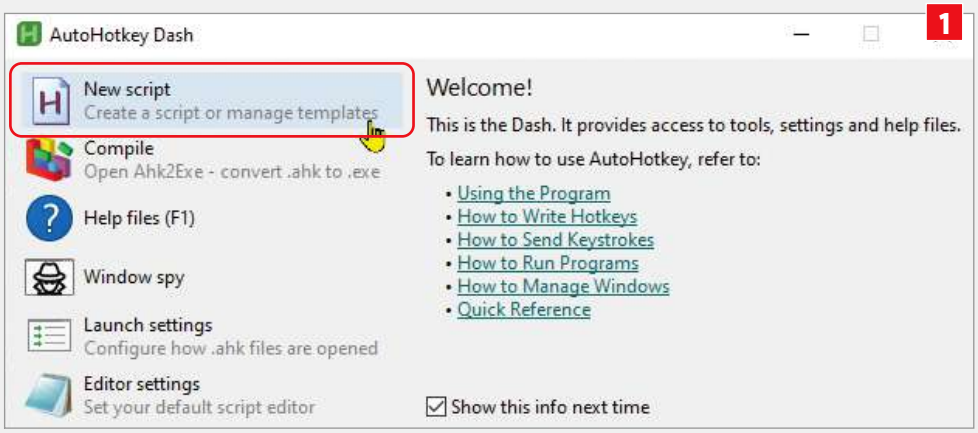
Can I create a keyboard shortcut to paste my email address?

Q Can I create a keyboard shortcut that inserts my email address? Ideally, it would involve pressing no more than two keys.

Robert Garbolinski


AutoHotkey Dash
New script
Create a script or manage templates
Compile
Open Ahk2Exe - convert .ahk to .exe
Help files (F1)
Window spy
Launch settings
Configure how .ahk files are opened
Editor settings
Set your default script editor
Welcome!
This is the Dash. It provides access to tools, settings and help files.
To learn how to use AutoHotkey, refer to:
Using the Program
How to Write Hotkeys
How to Send Keystrokes
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Quick Reference
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1

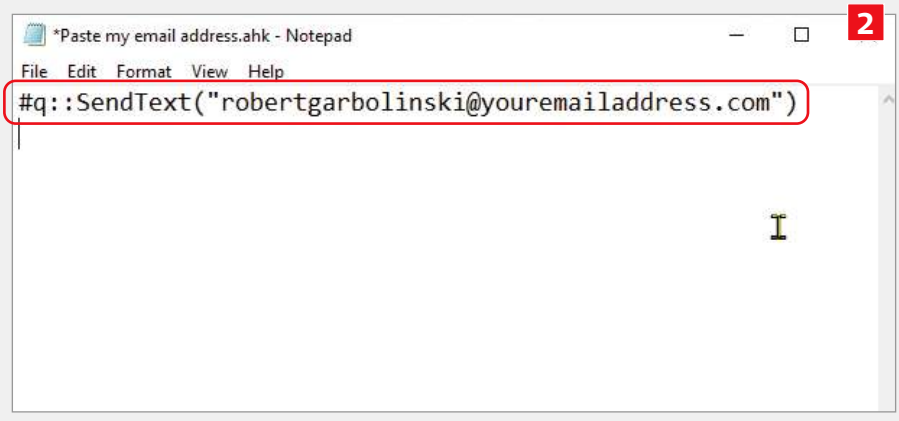
Select 'New script' on AutoHotkey's Dash panel to begin creating your keyboard shortcut

A Windows doesn't have a feature for this, but you can achieve it easily by installing a tool that lets you run a macro to automate the task for you. Perhaps the best-known and most powerful tool is AutoHotkey, which you can download for free from www.autohotkey.com.

The tool is quite complicated, but what you want to achieve is fairly easy. First, install AutoHotkey then, on the AutoHotkey Dash panel, click 'New script' (see screenshot 1). Give it an appropriate name (such as 'Paste my email address') before clicking Edit. The first time you do this, you'll need to choose an editing tool. Windows Notepad is an easy and obvious choice.

The next step is to create a macro script that does what you want. This is where things can get complicated, because AutoHotkey is very powerful and there's no quick or easy way to explain the syntax and how to use it to create macros. In other words, if you want to do anything beyond the simple project we explain here, you'll need to click the 'Help files' button in AutoHotkey Dash and read the manual.

The following script will paste your email address when you press and hold the Windows key while tapping Q (so the shortcut is 'Windows key+Q'). In Notepad, type `#q::SendText("robertgarbolinski@youremailaddress.com")` 2, replacing the section in quotes with your actual email address. You'll also find this code on our Pastebin page, at www.snipca.com/54910.



Use Notepad in AutoHotkey to create and save your keyboard shortcut macros

The part of the script that assigns which keys to use is `#q::`. The # (hash) symbol defines the first button (the Windows key in this case), while the second specifies the next button. If you wanted to use the Control (Ctrl) key instead of the Windows key, for example, you could replace # with a ^ (caret) symbol. The Alt key is represented by ! and Shift is +.

So if you changed the script to `!r::SendText("robertgarbolinski@youremailaddress.com")`, you would press Alt+R to paste your email address instead of Windows key+Q.

When you exit Notepad, it will save the script as a file with a .ahk extension. Double-click this to run the script. It will run in the background, ready to execute on your command, until you exit Windows.

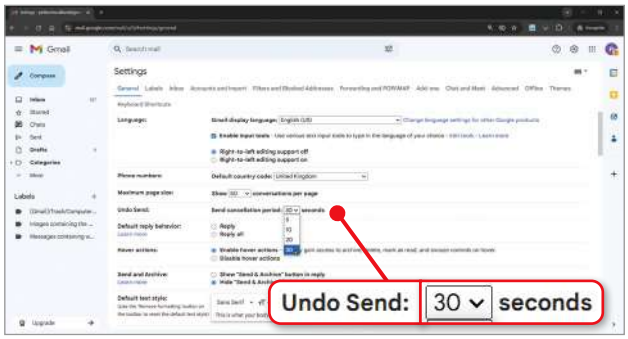
If you want it to run automatically each time you launch Windows, press Windows key+R to open the Run box, then type `shell:startup` and press Enter. This will open your system's Startup folder. Drag and drop your script file into this folder. You can create as many scripts as you want, and drag and drop their .ahk files into the Startup folder.

Could someone read my misaddressed email?

Q I recently mistyped the email address of an old friend while trying to contact him. We hadn't been in touch for a few years, so his email address wasn't in my new tablet's contacts book. I typed the address and clicked Send, but then realised my mistake almost immediately. Thankfully, my message didn't contain anything particularly private, but now it has gone to the wrong address. Will the accidental recipient be able to read it? It's probably too late now, but is there some way I could have cancelled the message?

Phil Harris

A There are several factors that determine whether someone is likely to receive and read a misaddressed email. First, we think it's unlikely that the mistyped address you sent us is actually a real Gmail address, so the message probably ended up going nowhere. In such circumstances, you would usually get a 'bounce back' message, telling you that the address doesn't exist. You didn't mention receiving one of these, so we assume you haven't or you probably wouldn't be asking. However, it's worth checking your spam folder.



Choose how long you want the option to stop an email being sent

That aside, the ability to 'cancel' a message depends on which email tool and system you use to send it. Some corporate email systems have a 'recall' function, for example, though this won't necessary stop anyone who has already received a message reading it.

Gmail doesn't have this specific feature but it does have an Undo option that might have helped you in this instance. With this option enabled, Gmail pauses for a few seconds before sending the message, and displays a pop-up Undo button that gives you a few seconds to stop the action. It's barely enough time to notice it, let alone reach for the button with your cursor before clicking.

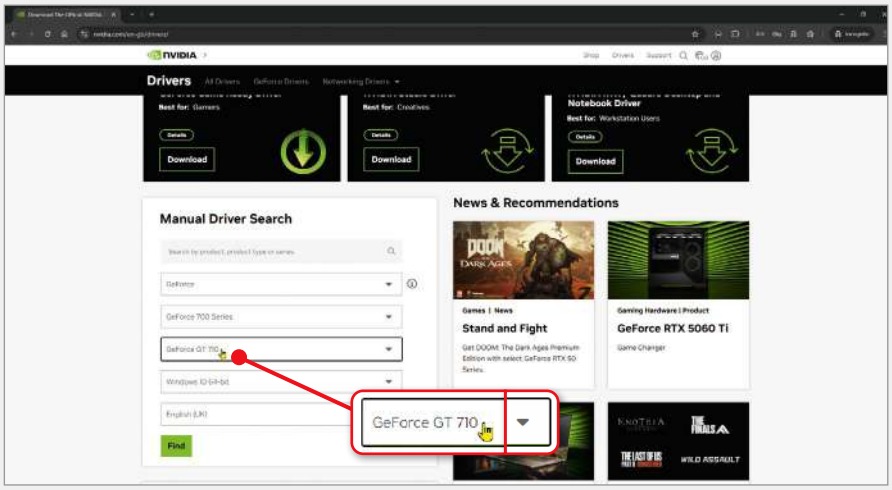
However, you can increase this safety window by changing the length of the pause. To do this, click the Settings cog at the top right, then 'See all settings'. Next, select the General tab, then scroll down to Undo Send. There, next to 'Send cancellation period', click to open the dropdown menu and choose a longer delay (see screenshot). The maximum is 30 seconds, which is what we would recommend. replace with CAT713.

Where's the missing socket on my graphics card?

Q I bought an MSI GeForce GT 710 graphics card, which Dilwyn Jones recommended in Issue 707's Readers' Tips (page 40), but I can't find a driver for it on Nvidia's website. Also, the instructions mention connecting a 12V plug into the card, but I couldn't find a socket. It works but I don't know if it would work better if I could download a new driver. Thanks for your consistently useful mag – I've been a subscriber for years!

Michael Sweetman

A The GT 710 is a pretty basic passively cooled graphics card. This means it draws all the power it needs through the PCI Express (PCIe) slot, and needs only a heat sink rather than a fan to keep it cool. MSI's instructions at www.snipca.com/54906 are generic, and while they do mention connecting a 12V power lead, this instruction doesn't apply to your card.



Select the correct menu options on Nvidia's website to find new drivers for your graphics card

As for the drivers, they're still available although Nvidia's website doesn't make them easy to find. Go to www.nvidia.com/drivers and select GeForce from the top dropdown menu, followed by GeForce 700 Series from the second. You will then be able to select GeForce GT 710 from the third menu (see screenshot above). Click 'Find' followed by View then Download. The latest available drivers should ensure the card performs at its best.

Can I move this large AppData folder?

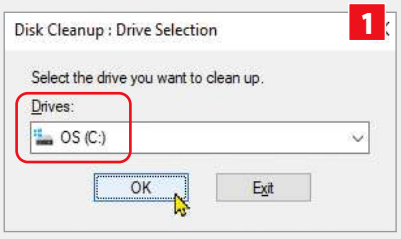
Q There's a huge folder called AppData on my laptop's C drive that's around 24GB. Can I move it to another drive without affecting my apps?

Simon Tatterson

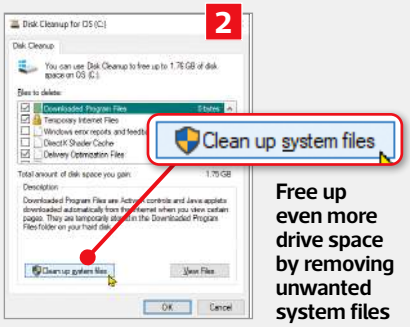
A There's no safe way to move the AppData folder, because it is deeply woven into the fabric of Windows and your apps. While technically you could relocate it, doing so would wreak havoc ranging from app crashes to login problems. So we advise against it.

If you need to clear space on your C drive, start with Windows' Disk Cleanup utility. Click Start, type cleanup then click Disk Cleanup. Choose drive C (see screenshot 1), then click OK.

There are two parts to the process. First, Disk Cleanup recommends files you can safely remove. Tick the box beside each item you want to delete, then click OK followed by Delete Files. Next, return to Disk Cleanup and click 'Clean up system files' 2 to see what else is taking up space. Again, tick any items you don't need, then click OK followed by Delete Files.

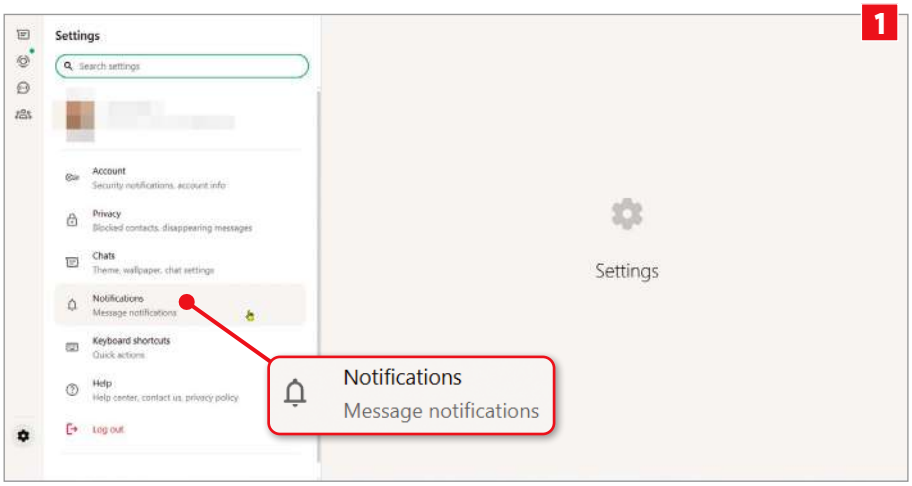


Use Disk Cleanup to remove unwanted files from your computer's C drive



Free up even more drive space by removing unwanted system files

How do I disable these annoying WhatsApp pop-ups?



To change your notification permissions in Chrome, go to Settings then click Notifications

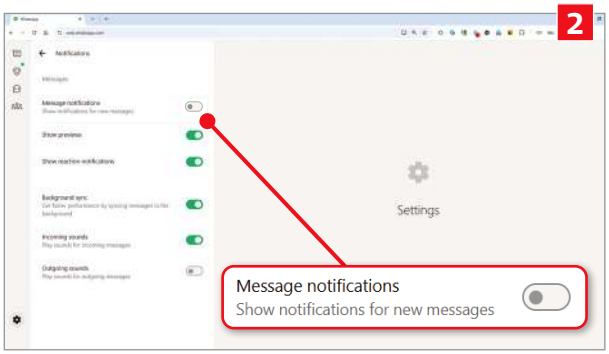
Q I've been using the web version of WhatsApp (https://web.whatsapp.com) on my PC for many years without any problems. Recently, when I launched Chrome, a panel appeared on the WhatsApp tab asking if it could show notifications. Without thinking I clicked the Yes or Allow button (I can't remember which it was). Now, whenever I receive a WhatsApp message, a pop-up appears in the right-hand corner of my screen, summarising its contents. I suppose this might be useful to some but I find it very annoying.

I can already hear when a WhatsApp message arrives, and I'd prefer to deal with it in my own time, rather than seeing this distracting pop-up constantly. How can I stop this?

Nathan Porter

A This is an easy mistake to make, and it probably happened after a recent WhatsApp redesign prompted the site to ask for permission to show notifications. Thankfully, it's pretty easy to fix.

First, in your WhatsApp browser tab, click the Settings icon at the bottom left, just above your user icon or image. Next, under Settings, click Notifications (see screenshot 1). You can use the sliders here to specify which notifications you see, and when. Alternatively, to put things back the way they were, switch them all off at once by switching off the 'Message notifications' slider 2.



To block all message notifications, switch off this slider in Notifications

Q: Can I replace my PC's hard drive with my backup SSD?

A: Issue 696, page 67 – find it on our 2024 Back Issue CD

Buy it from www.snipca.com/53433

How do we get internet during our cruise?

Q We're going on cruise to the Caribbean this year, and I understand that onboard Wi-Fi is notoriously expensive. I'm not sure how best to keep our two Android mobiles and Android tablet connected while we're away. We're not gamers, so we only need email, WhatsApp, texts and possibly the ability to make phone calls. I understand that buying an eSIM for the mobiles would be better than paying roaming charges, but might a portable router be an even better solution? What kind of signal would such a router use while at sea? If it has to connect to the ship's Wi-Fi, surely it would make no difference to the cost of connecting the tablet or mobiles.

William Robertson

Cruise ships have a monopoly on internet access when you're out at sea

A You're right that cruise liners tend to charge an arm and a leg for onboard Wi-Fi, simply because they can. When you're out at sea, you're usually far beyond the range of mobile-phone networks. As such, an eSIM or portable router won't be any help, because they connect through a mobile mast. You'd get a signal when docked, but then so would your normal phone with roaming enabled (though it's worth noting that using a local SIM or eSIM might be cheaper, depending on your existing provider's roaming charges).

So for now there's no solution. However, Starlink is in the process of rolling out its 'Direct to Cell' service globally (www.snipca.com/54907). This technology in effect turns Starlink satellites into mobile-phone masts in the sky. Pretty much any mobile phone will be able to connect, as long as it has a view of the sky. No UK operators currently offer contracts that include 'Direct to Cell' connectivity but it's only a matter of time. In the US, T-Mobile charges an extra $10 (around £7.42) per month for this service, and we expect UK operators to offer similar deals.

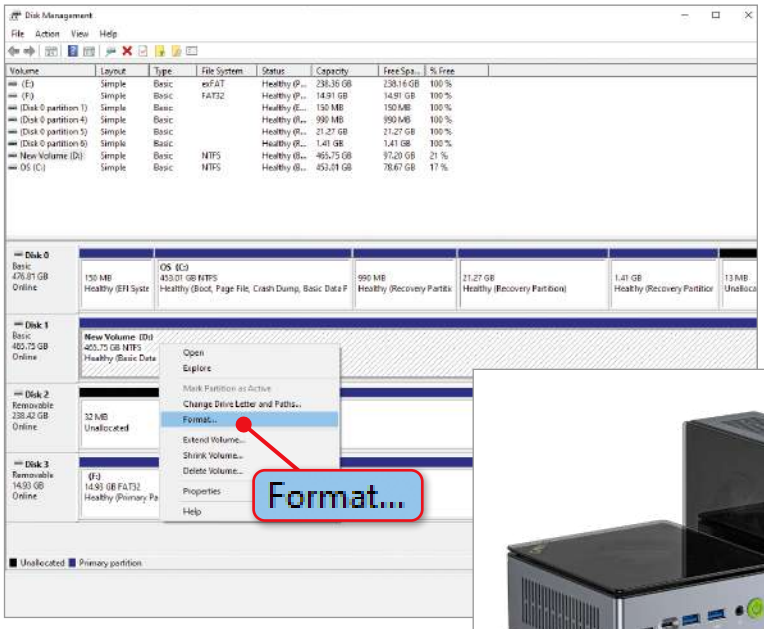
How do I install an SSD into my new mini PC?

Q I recently bought a GMKtec K11 mini PC. I'd like to install an SSD that was previously in my Beelink mini PC (www.snipca.com/55079, pictured), but I can't find any instructions. Can you help?

Ian Barrass

A You didn't tell us which SSD you have but, as it's from another mini PC, we'll assume it's an M.2 drive. As your GMKtec K11 has two M.2 slots, adding a second drive shouldn't be a problem. The only caveat is that your SSD must be a 2280 (22x80mm) model or smaller, because that's the maximum physical size the K11 can accommodate.

To install the drive, remove the screws from the PC's base, carefully remove the case then locate the empty M.2 slot. Next, slide in your SSD at a slight angle, then push it flat. You'll need to secure it with a small screw, which the manufacturer should have supplied with the drive. If not, the type of screw you need is an M2x3mm (the M2 in the name is pure coincidence).



To format a blank drive, right-click it in Disk Management and select Format

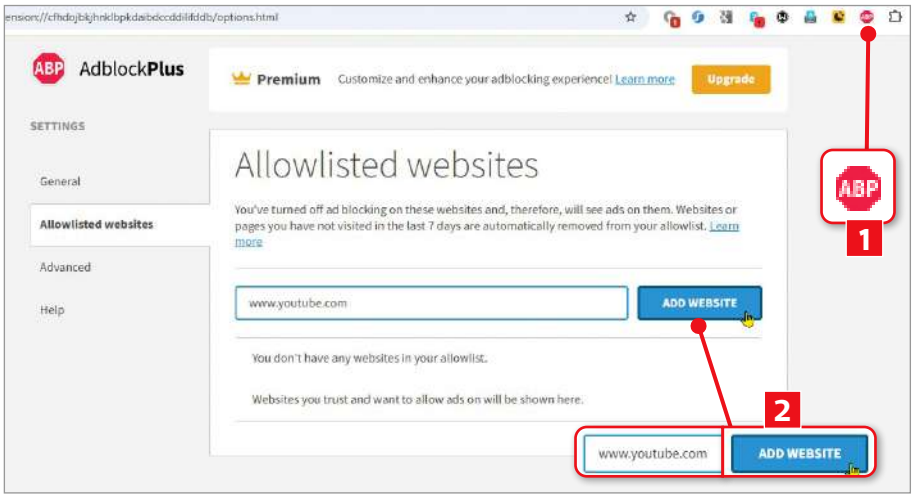
GMKtec's K11 has two M.2 slots for SSDs

Finally, put the case back together and power up your computer. The drive should show up automatically, but if it's blank, you may need to format it before you can use it. To do this, press Windows key+X to open the Quick Links menu then choose Disk Management. Now right-click the relevant drive (probably labelled Disk 1, following Disk 0, but check to make sure) and choose Format (see screenshot).

Why can't I watch YouTube videos on my PC?

Q For some reason, YouTube has stopped working on my PC. When I try to use it, I see a message saying an error has occurred and to try again later. I've tried all the recommended solutions from Google, but without luck. I'm completely stumped. I'm currently using Windows 10 22H2 – the most recent update. Any ideas?

Trevor Warrs


AdblockPlus
Premium
Customize and enhance your adblocking experience! Learn more
Upgrade
SETTINGS
General
Allowlisted websites
Advanced
Help
Allowlisted websites
You've turned off ad blocking on these websites and, therefore, will see ads on them. Websites or pages you have not visited in the last 7 days are automatically removed from your allowlist. Learn more
www.youtube.com
ADD WEBSITE
You don't have any websites in your allowlist.
Websites you trust and want to allow ads on will be shown here.
1
2
www.youtube.com
ADD WEBSITE

To add an exception in AdBlock, select 'Allowlisted websites' in Options, add a URL and click Add Website

A This is almost certainly due to an ad-blocking tool on your PC. YouTube doesn't like them and is using increasingly aggressive methods to detect them and limit their use, including blocking the service until the user disables them. Sooner or later the developer of your ad-blocker will release an update and YouTube will work again.

This is an ongoing technical battle between Google and the developers of ad-blocking tools, and there's no real solution. Your only options are to disable your ad-blocker, use a private window for YouTube – such as Chrome's Incognito mode, or InPrivate in Edge – or amend the ad-blocker filters to create an exception for YouTube, which unfortunately means putting up with ads.

We don't know which ad-blocker you use, but to create an exception in the AdBlock Plus extensions for Chrome and Edge, for example, right-click the AdBlock Plus icon in the toolbar (1 in our screenshot) then choose Options. Next, on the left, click 'Allowlisted websites' and then, in the text field on the right, type www.youtube.com before clicking Add Website 2. Now restart your browser and you should be able to watch YouTube videos without any problems.

Is my phone data safe during a battery repair?

Q The battery in my Motorola G50 phone (pictured below right) needs replacing. A local shop said it can do it for £20 if I buy the battery from eBay. However, my wife questions how secure my data will be while the phone is in their possession? Will they need it unlocked to check that the battery works? My banking apps need my fingerprint or password, so I think they're safe, but my contacts, emails, Facebook, WhatsApp and other accounts don't require any security other than the unlock code.

Allan Postgate

A repair shop won't need your unlock code just to change a battery

Changing the battery in a phone like the Motorola Moto G50 is a job for a specialist

A If you share your phone's unlock code with the repair company or hand it over unlocked, the technicians will have access to any apps that aren't protected by their own security – such as the passwords or fingerprint logins your banking apps use.

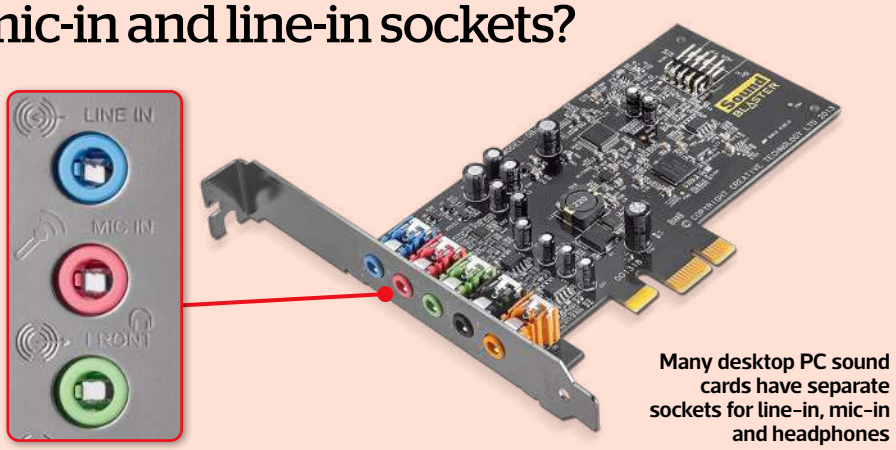
Thankfully, if the only problem with your phone is the battery, a repair shop won't need the unlock code to check their work. If the phone switches on after they've replaced the battery, that should be good enough to confirm that the repair has been successful. So, if the shop is asking you to provide your unlock code, we'd question why – or politely request that they carry out the work in front of you.

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN...

Headphone, mic-in and line-in sockets?

Q My old desktop PC has separate sockets for 3.5mm headphone, microphone and a line-in audio. But my laptop has just one 3.5mm audio socket. This seems to work for both microphone and headphone with the headset that I plug into it and also works just fine for audio and speech input. But it makes me wonder what the difference is between the mic and line-in socket on my old desktop PC? And how come my laptop has just one socket for everything?

Trevor Sanders



Many desktop PC sound cards have separate sockets for line-in, mic-in and headphones

A Let's start with your microphone (mic) and line-in sockets on your desktop PC's sound card, because there's a subtle but important difference. Specifically, the mic input is designed to deal with weak incoming signals, such as that from your headset mic. The sound card (like the Creative Sound Blaster unit pictured above right) then amplifies this signal. By contrast, the line-in socket is designed for stronger signals output directly from other audio equipment, such as a hi-fi system. In other words, a line-in signal should not need boosting.

So, if you were to plug a line-level signal into your desktop PC's mic socket you'll probably get wildly amplified and distorted sound. Similarly, plugging a microphone into a line-in socket might result in muffled sound, or silence.

Of course, laptops are designed to be compact. As such, almost all new models feature 'combo' sockets that pack multiple audio functions into one 3.5mm connector. Internal components and software work out what's plugged in.

Typically, this lets you connect either a headphone or a mic, or both at once – such as with your headset. Pricier business or gaming laptops might also have line-in support, either via a combination or dedicated socket. However, a line-in socket is not commonly found on consumer PCs, simply because few people other than audio professionals need one – and those that do are likely to buy dedicated equipment to make the connection.

Want to know the difference between technical terms? Email noproblem@computeractive.co.uk

How do I connect my old camcorder?

Q I have a Sony Handycam CCD-TR3100E camcorder that I'd like to connect to either a 2012-era 13in MacBook Pro (running High Sierra 10.13.6 macOS) or a 2022 MacBook Pro M2 (running Sequoia 15.3 2), so I can copy old video tapes for editing. Which MacBook would be the best for this purpose and which cables and ports would I need? Does either MacBook have the required software or if not what would I need to use? Thanks for a great magazine and any help you can give me.

James Millard

Use an analog-to-digital converter (ADC) like the Elgato Video Capture

A Your older MacBook Pro here is probably the best bet, simply because it'll work better with the more dated hardware and software necessary for connecting your camcorder.

First, you'll need an analog-to-digital converter (ADC) like the pictured Elgato Video Capture (£89 from www.snipca.com/54908), which includes basic video-capture software for the Mac. This (and many similar devices) connects via traditional USB-A, rather than USB-C – and your newer MacBook lacks USB-A ports, which is why we suggest using your old one.

Next, connect your camcorder to the ADC using a 3.5mm-to-RCA (phono) cable. This should have come with your camcorder but, if you've lost the original, be sure to buy a compatible replacement because Sony used their own wiring for its Handycam range. The VMC-20FR cable (£7 from www.snipca.com/54909) should work.

Then, use the supplied Elgato video-capture software, pressing the Play button on your camcorder just before clicking Record in the app. Finally, edit the MP4 files produced by Elgato in Apple iMovie, or copy them to a USB stick to do the job more efficiently on your newer MacBook.

Next Issue

ON SALE Weds 16 July

- Why is Kaspersky still installed on my PC?
- Why won't my backup drive eject?
- What's going on with Winget? ...And many more

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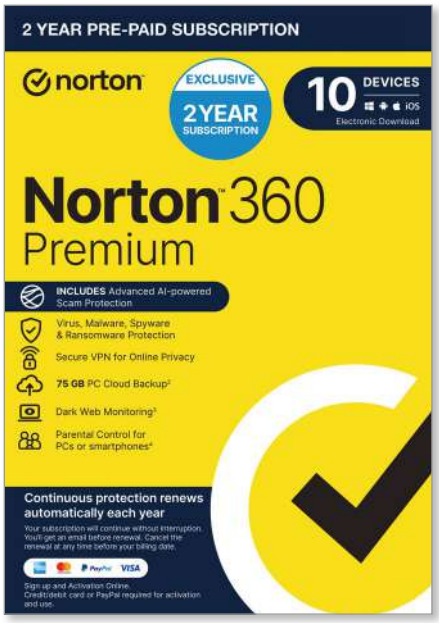

Norton is made by NortonLifeLock Inc – a standalone company dedicated to consumer cyber safety. It has always performed strongly in *Computeractive* antivirus tests, so we highly recommend it.

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Reader Support

Having a problem with our recommended software or expert tips? Email **editor@computeractive.co.uk** and we'll do our best to help

Why can't I see your competition questions?

Q I try to enter your competitions every issue (see page 33). But when I click the Snipca link to go to the specific page for the competition, I scroll down to look for the question, but it's never there. What's going wrong here?

David Felsenstein

Find your Fire TV Stick's serial number in settings, then match it against Wikipedia's model numbers

A You're probably using a privacy extension in your browser that blocks iframes, which are windows embedded inside a web page that show content from another web page. Some advertisers use iframes to track you across the web, so it's understandable that many privacy extensions block them.

The problem is that iframes are also used for perfectly legitimate reasons, such as showing videos, forms or – as we do – questions for competitions (see screenshot 1 below).

One solution is to disable the extension when you're on our competitions page. In Privacy Badger (which does block our iframe), for example, click the badger icon followed by 'Disable for this site' (see screenshot 2). It will automatically refresh and the iframe containing the question should appear, letting you answer it and submit your details.

How do I check age of my Amazon Fire TV Stick?

Q My attention was caught by your news story about Netflix stopping working on Amazon Fire TV Sticks made between 2014 and 2016 (Issue 711, page 6). I bought an early Fire TV Stick, so I'm fairly sure it will be affected. How can I check?

Paul Gooden

A Open Settings in your Fire TV Stick's home screen, then click 'Device & Software' (or 'My Fire TV'). Now select About and look for your stick's serial number – the first few characters usually indicate the model. You can match this to the model numbers on Wikipedia (www.snipca.com/55105, pictured above). Also useful is this Amazon page showing photos of every Fire TV device: www.snipca.com/55102.

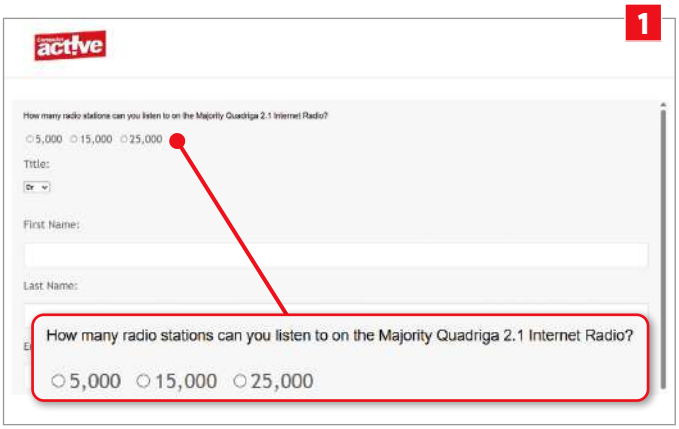
Is the Obsbot Meet SE really your new favourite webcam?

Q In Issue 710 (page 26) you reviewed the Obsbot Meet SE webcam (pictured), saying it knocks your long-time favourite, the Logitech C925e, off its perch as your favourite webcam. But I noticed that the C925e was still listed as your favourite in your 'Buy It!' section. And your review seemed to be focused more on the benefits of the C925e than the Meet SE. Please clarify.

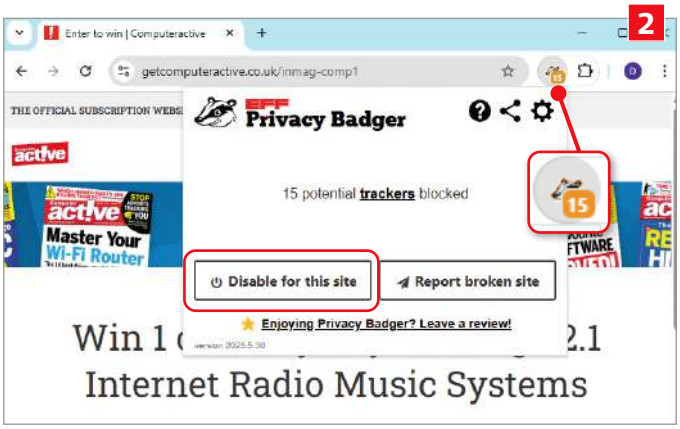
Richard Curtis

The Obsbot Meet SE can be angled in landscape or portrait and keeps you centred in calls

A Apologies for the confusion. Yes, the Obsbot Meet SE has replaced the Logitech C925e as our favourite webcam. We've now updated our 'Buy It!' section accordingly (see page 32). Our review should have made it clear that the Meet SE can be angled in landscape or portrait mode, and that its auto-focus feature tracks your position in front of the camera, so you remain the centre of attention and crystal clear at all times. This worked superbly well in our tests. It's available for £79 from www.snipca.com/54725.



Our competitions page shows the question in an iframe, which some privacy extensions will block



Make the iframe appear by clicking the extension's icon then disabling it for our competitions page

Jargon Buster

32bit/64bit A measure of how much data a PC can process at once. Most older computers are 32bit, more modern ones are 64bit.

AHK A script file used by AutoHotkey to automate tasks, create shortcuts and remap keys in Windows.

AMOLED Active-Matrix Organic Light-Emitting Diode. An alternative technology to LCD for creating flat-panel displays.

ARM Advanced RISC Machine. Processors that are more energy-efficient and are used in more devices than those made by AMD and Intel.

Augmented reality Lets you view the real world on a screen and add virtual elements.

AV1F AV1 Image File Format. Open-source image file format that has better compression than WebP, JPEG, PNG and GIF.

Benchmarking Comparing software and products with an accepted standard.

Beta A version of software that's being tested. Beta versions are often released so problems can be ironed out.

Biometric Using measurable personal characteristics, such as fingerprints, for identification.

BIOS Basic Input-Output System. Software built into every PC that connects the vital components.

Bootable Describes a device or disc with system files on it so it can be used to start up your computer.

Cache A temporary space for storing information.

cd/m² Candela per square metre. Standard unit of brightness.

Chatbot An AI computer program designed to recreate conversation with human users, especially over the internet.

Client A program that acts as an interface between PC and server.

Code Programming languages used to create software.

Config file A text file used by software that tells it how to behave.

Cookie A small text file stored on your computer by a website.

Core Units on a processor that carry out program instructions.

Differential backup A data backup that copies only the files that have changed since the last full backup was performed.

Distro A version of the Linux OS and the programs that go with it.

dpi Dots per inch. A measure of printed image quality, or the size an object will be shown on screen.

Driver A file that tells Windows how to work with an external device.

Dual boot To set up a PC with two operating systems.

Emulator A program that makes one computer act like another, letting it run that computer's software.

End-to-end encryption A way of encrypting messages so that the only people who can read them are the sender and recipient.

eSIM A virtual SIM card that's built into a phone, making it easier to change network.

EXE A program file designed to run in Windows.

Ethernet A standard used for all wired computer networks.

Factory settings The original system state of an electronic device.

FireWire Alternative to USB found on video cameras and hard drives.

Firmware Basic software stored on hardware to control its operation.

FLAC A type of digital audio file that can be created from a CD.

Flash memory A type of memory that can retain information without a power source.

GDPR General Data Protection Regulation. 2018 EU law strengthening people's privacy.

GHz Gigahertz. A measure of how many instructions a chip can process per second.

GIF A type of image file often used on the web, but now largely superseded by PNG.

God Mode An option in Windows that shows access to 250 control panel settings in one list.

Graphics card A component in a computer that produces the image shown on the monitor.

HDMI Connection that transmits high-definition video and audio.

Heat sink A block of metal used to help dissipate the heat from a chip.

HEIC High-efficiency image container. Apple's default image format for iOS.

Hz Hertz. Measures the frequency something happens: 1Hz equals once a second.

Incognito mode A browser mode that doesn't save your internet history.

ISO file A type of image file that contains data from a CD or DVD.

JPEG A common type of image file created by most digital cameras.

LAN Computer network in one place, such as a home or office.

Large language model A type of artificial intelligence algorithm that analyses huge amounts of datasets to create content.

Line-level signal An audio signal from devices like hi-fi systems that's strong enough to connect directly to audio inputs without needing extra boosting or amplification.

Location spoofing Changing your location online so you can appear to be in a country of your choosing.

M.2 A standard specification for PC expansion cards and connectors.

MAC address A unique code that identifies any router.

Machine learning The science of teaching computers how to learn by themselves.

Macro An automated series of commands or options that can be run at any time.

Manifest V2/V3 Second and third versions of the software that runs Chrome browser extensions.

Mask In an image-editing program a mask is used to block off an area of the image, making it immune to changes.

Mesh Wi-Fi Wireless network system that uses multiple, connected routers to stretch Wi-Fi further than a traditional router.

MP3 A type of digital audio file often used on music players.

MP4 A type of digital movie file often used for portable players.

NAS Network-attached storage. A hard drive attached to a network that can be shared with other PCs.

OCR Optical character recognition. The process by which printed text is scanned and converted into documents that can be edited.

.NET Microsoft's tool for building software.

OCuLink Connectivity standard that allows high-speed data transfers between devices using PCI Express.

Open source Software that can be modified by anyone, rather than just by the employees of the company that created it.

Packet size Amount in parcels of information sent over the internet or other computer networks.

Partition A large hard drive can be split into two or more partitions or 'virtual' drives.

Passkey A method for signing into accounts by typing a one-off code, fingerprint or facial recognition rather than a password.

PCIe A faster version of PCI – a slot on the motherboard for expansion cards.

Phishing A form of internet fraud that tries to trick you into revealing personal details.

Plug-in A small program that adds extra features to software.

PNG A format for images that shrinks file sizes using compression.

QR code A barcode that can be read using smartphones.

RAM The computer's working area, used for data storage while the PC is switched on.

Random data Data from a file that a computer reads or writes in any order. Much slower than doing so sequentially.

RAW A format for digital photos that stores the image exactly as the camera captured it.

RCA Connector used to carry audio and video signals.

Read speed How long it takes a hard drive to 'read' data, and respond to it.

Refresh rate Measured in Hertz (Hz), the number of times per second that the image on your monitor is redrawn.

Roaming charge Fee incurred for using your phone to receive data through overseas mobile networks.

Runtime Programming system for developing software in Windows.

S-video A high-quality video connection that carries brightness and colour information separately.

Script A short program that is stored on a web server to control part of a website.

SD card Secure Digital card. A popular type of memory card.

Sequential data Data from a file that a computer reads or writes in a strict order.

SIM The smart card used by all digital mobile phones.

Sound card An expansion card that lets a PC create system audio, music and more.

SSD Solid-state drive. Storage that uses no moving parts.

SSID A name used to identify a wireless network.

System restore point Collection of system files stored on a given date and time to which Windows can revert if a problem occurs.

Temporary file Created by sites and software to store info.

Tooltip A message that opens when the cursor hovers over an option.

TPM A computer chip that stores keys which encrypt data on your hard drive.

Transition A way of joining two video clips together or moving from one clip to another.

Tri-band A router that broadcasts on three radio bands – one on 2.4GHz, two on 5.0GHz.

Two-factor authentication A system that uses two different means to identify the user.

USB 2.0/3.0/3.1/3.2/4.0 Faster successors to USB.

USB-C A connector that's reversible.

VESA A standard mount for attaching monitors on to stands, walls and PCs.

VPN Keeps all internet communication safe and private.

WAV file An audio file, used for recording music and other sounds and saving them on your PC.

Waveform An image that represents an audio signal or recording.

WebP Google's image format designed to create files that are smaller for the same quality, or of higher quality for the same size, than JPEG, PNG and GIF.

Wi-Fi 7 Faster successor to Wi-Fi 6, with an estimated maximum speed of around 46Gbps.

Widget A small program that runs on the Windows desktop.

Write speed How long it takes a hard drive to save data.

Broadband Deals

	Provider	Package Name	Monthly Price	Contract Length	Broadband Speed	Reward*	First-year Cost*
1	vodafone	Fibre Fibre 150	**£26.00** £29.00 from 1st April 2026	24 Months	**150Mbps** avg. speed	**£105** Gift Card	CHEAPEST **£216.00**
2	sky	Full Fibre 150	**£26.00** Price could change during contract	24 Months	**150Mbps** avg. speed	**£80** Gift Card	**£232.00**
3	BT	Full Fibre 100	**£29.99** £32.99 from 31st March 2026	24 Months	**150Mbps** avg. speed	**£60** Gift Card	**£308.88**
4	Virgin media	M125	**£23.99** £27.49 from April 2026 Bill	18 Months	**132Mbps** avg. speed	**£80** Bill Credit	**£218.38**

* Payments based on 12x monthly cost (including price rise) minus reward value

*Reward subject to change. Available as of 19th June 2025.

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Know How

Worried that something nasty might be lurking in his web browser, **Robert Irvine** tries to...

Test the safety of extensions

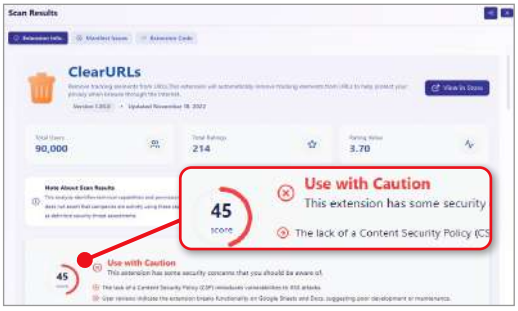
In the classic film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (either the 1956 or 1978 version – they're both good), aliens infiltrate society by replacing human beings with sinister clones. Which is not dissimilar to the way malicious browser extensions are masquerading as legitimate tools, so they can steal users' data and infect their PCs.

> Was my browser harbouring malicious add-ons that secretly collect my data?

Barely a week goes by without new reports of dodgy Chrome extensions somehow evading Google's 'strict' security checks and threatening millions of users. Some of these nasty add-ons pretend to be popular tools such as VPNs, AI assistants and video downloaders (see www.snipca.com/55132). Others are maliciously modified versions of existing extensions that have been sold or abandoned by the original developers.

Either way, they're becoming more prevalent and – like the 'pod people' in *Body Snatchers* – they could already be among us. I install lots of extensions in the course of my job, and often forget to remove those I no longer use. Could my browser be harbouring malicious add-ons that are secretly collecting my data and compromising my security?

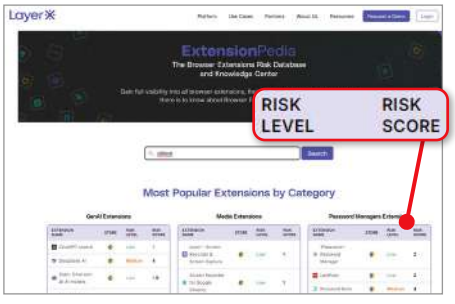
To find out, I first tried Chrome's Safety Check feature, which is supposed to detect and warn you about dodgy extensions. I opened the browser's Settings, selected 'Privacy and security' and clicked the 'Go to Safety Check' button. This confirmed I had Enhanced Safe Browsing enabled and "Nothing else needs your attention at the moment". I also checked the Extensions page (type chrome://extensions into your address bar) to see if Chrome had flagged any tools as risky. But the only one it had turned off was uBlock Origin, "because it is no longer supported" – the culmination of Google's long-running war against the popular content blocker.



CRXplorer warned Robert to use the ClearURLs extension with caution

The lack of red warnings should have reassured me that all my extensions were safe, but sadly it didn't. Chrome hardly performed an in-depth check, and it's Google's casual attitude to browser security that has led to the rise in malicious add-ons in the first place.

So I next tried a website called CRXplorer (www.snipca.com/55133), which scans browser extensions for suspicious permissions and code. This looked very promising, providing a list of recently scanned extensions such as Tampermonkey, ClearURLs and Grammarly. Clicking the Scan buttons next to these displayed CRXplorer's reports, which analysed each tool's security and privacy policies – including 'data-collection capabilities' – and gave it a safety score. For example, ClearURLs received a score of 45 (out of 100 – see screenshot left), with red warnings to use it with caution because it lacks a content-security policy.



ExtensionPedia provided risk levels and scores for every extension Robert searched for

Disappointingly, when I searched for some of the more obscure extensions I have installed, CRXplorer couldn't find them. Even well-known tools such as the new-tab-page customiser Momentum weren't in its database.

My final stop was the new website ExtensionPedia (www.snipca.com/55134), which is described by its creator, security company LayerX, as a "Wikipedia for extensions". This evaluates the security of more than 200,000 Chromium and Firefox add-ons, which I was pleased to discover included all the extensions I had installed.

ExtensionPedia gives each tool a colour-coded risk level and an overall risk score (see screenshot below left), and rates the 'severity' of every permission it requires. It also gives extensions a 'reputation risk' rating, based on its developer, number of installs and user reviews. Other information is only available to LayerX business customers.

I actually preferred CRXplorer's presentation of reports and its more in-depth analysis, so it's a shame it doesn't cover a wider range of extensions. Between the two sites, I was able to identify nearly a dozen tools with dubious privacy policies and unnecessary permissions, which I uninstalled immediately. Incidentally, both declared uBlock Origin to be safe to use, which just goes to show what Google knows.

Need help with your browser extensions? Let us know: noproblem@computeractive.co.uk

Next issue: Robert tries to boost his indoor mobile signal

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